NATION

Hartal against wild animal attacks turns violent in Kerala

>> Page: 4 <<

BUSINESS

Cutting China out of trade would be a mistake: Chinese FM

>> Page: 7 <<

SPORTS

Yashasvi rocks Eng with ton as India in cruise control

>> Page: 8 <<

www.twitter.com/EnglishSalar
www.facebook.com/EnglishSalar
www.instagram.com/dailysalarenglish
youtube.com/@dailysalardigital

SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

سالار روزنامہ بنگلور

Website: salarnews.in | www.magzter.com | 18 FEBRUARY 2024 | SUNDAY | BENGALURU | 8 SHABAN, 1445 AH | Vol 4 | Issue No 32 | Pages: 8

PHOTO: PTI

Gulzar, Sanskrit scholar to get Jnanpith Award

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Renowned Urdu poet Gulzar and Sanskrit scholar Jagadguru Rambhadracharya have been named the recipients of the 58th Jnanpith Award, Jnanpith selection committee announced on Saturday. Sampooran Singh Kalra, popularly known as Gulzar, is celebrated for his works in Hindi cinema and is considered one of the finest Urdu poets of this era. Rambhadracharya, founder and head of Tulsi Peeth in Chitrakoot, is a renowned Hindu spiritual leader, educator and writer of more than 240 books and texts, including four epics. Gulzar received Sahitya Akademi Award for Urdu in 2002. —PTI

Buzz grows around Kamal, his son switching to BJP

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

The buzz over senior Congress leader Kamal Nath's possible switch to BJP grew louder on Saturday with former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister saying if there would be any such thing, he would inform the media first. His son Nakul Nath also drops Congress from his bio on social media. Congress leaders from Madhya Pradesh, however, stressed on the decades-old ties between Kamal Nath and the party to dismiss the speculation that he may cross over to BJP. Madhya Pradesh Congress Chief Jitu Patwari recalled how former prime minister Indira Gandhi had described Nath as her "third son". —PTI

>>>More on Page 3

Another prime accused in Sandeshkhali held

KOLKATA, 17 FEB

One of the prime accused in the case of alleged land grab and sexual harassment of women in Sandeshkhali in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district was arrested on Saturday. Local TMC leader Shibaprasad Hazra, who has been named in police complaints along with party colleagues and other two prime accused Shajahan Sheikh and Uttam Sardar, was nabbed from a hideout in Sandeshkhali. He will be produced before a local court on Sunday. Earlier, police have also arrested Uttam Sardar but Shajahan Sheikh remains absconding. —PTI

>>>More on Page 3

Director Rajkumar Santoshi gets 2 years jail

JAMNAGAR, 17 FEB

A court in Jamnagar in Gujarat on Saturday sentenced renowned filmmaker Rajkumar Santoshi to two years in jail and also directed him to pay Rs 2 crore to the complainant in a cheque return case. Santoshi, a director, producer and scriptwriter, is well known for action blockbusters like 'Ghayal' and 'Ghatak', the court drama 'Damini' and the iconic comedy film 'Andaz Apna Apna'. Senior Civil Judge VJ Gadhvi sentenced Santoshi to two years in jail and asked him to pay Rs 2 crore to the complainant, which is double the amount he had taken from the latter. —PTI

AAP wins trust vote in Delhi, Kejri slams BJP

Kejri claims BJP wants to crush AAP by any means

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Aam Aadmi Party government on Saturday won a trust vote in the 70-member Delhi Assembly.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal claiming that his party has emerged as the biggest challenger to the BJP, which "wants to crush it by any means".

Kejriwal, who is also the national Convener of AAP, won the confidence motion with the support of 54 MLAs and said no legislator of his party defected.

Out of 62 AAP MLAs in the Delhi Assembly, 54 were present in the House during the trust vote, two were in jail, two others were unwell, three were out of station and one was not present due to a wedding in his family, the AAP national convener said.

Kejriwal had moved the motion of confidence in the Assembly on Friday and accused BJP of trying to poach his party's MLAs.

Since seven of the eight BJP legislators were suspended for the remainder of the session for allegedly interfering during the Lieutenant Governor's address on Thursday, Leader of Opposition Ramvir Singh Bidhuri was the only Opposition MLA who was present in the House during the trust vote. He said there was no need for the confidence motion as AAP government enjoys a majority in the House. "But the chief minister has lost the confidence of the people of Delhi," Bidhuri said. —PTI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal speaks during his confidence motion in the Delhi Assembly on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

Kejri appears virtually before court

A Delhi court on Saturday granted exemption to Arvind Kejriwal from personal appearance for the day in a complaint filed by ED against him over non-compliance with its summonses. He appeared virtually for the hearing. —PTI

11,500 WORKERS ATTEND

BJP's 2-day national council meet begins

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

A two-day meeting of nearly 11,500 BJP delegates drawn from across the country was held here on Saturday, as the party's top brass led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi set the outline to campaign themes for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

From its elected panchayat heads to district presidents and Union ministers, BJP's 'national council' meeting is the ruling party's biggest organisational get-together in recent memory -- an exercise aimed at galvanising its cadre for the polls.

BJP Chief JP Nadda inaugurated the meeting and Modi will deliver the valedictory address, today. The meeting, held at Bharat Mandapam, saw the attendance of Chief Ministers, state Ministers, BJP state unit Presidents and its organisational leaders from across the country.

Representatives of the party's district bodies and 'morchas' from across the country also attended the mega meeting.

In the national council meetings held in the last 10 years, including the two organised in the national capital weeks before the 2014 and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the attendance had generally remained around 3,000.

Senior party leader Ravi Shankar Prasad has said two resolutions are likely to be passed by the council. —PTI

Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Narendra Modi and JP Nadda at Bharat Mandapam during BJP National Convention, in New Delhi on Saturday PHOTO: ANI

'NO LOANS PLEASE'

Karnataka Farmers Association protests at Freedom Park in Bengaluru on Saturday demanding the government to waive off their loans PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Farm leaders demand ordinance for MSP

CHANDIGARH, 17 FEB

A day before the crucial meeting with Union ministers, farm leaders on Saturday asked the Centre to bring an ordinance on giving a legal guarantee to MSP.

Union ministers Arjun Munda, Piyush Goyal and Nityanand Rai and farmer leaders from Punjab will meet on Sunday for the fourth round of talks.

The two sides met earlier on 8, 12 and 15 February but those talks remained inconclusive.

On the fifth day of their 'Delhi Chalo' march -- called by Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha -- the farmers stayed put at the Shambhu and Khanauri points of the Punjab-Haryana border as they press the Centre to accept their demands, including a legal guarantee to minimum support price (MSP) for crops.

Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher on Saturday demanded that the Centre should bring an ordinance on giving a legal guarantee to MSP, a key demand of protesting farmers.

"It (Centre) can bring the ordinance overnight, if it wants so," he added.

Speaking to reporters at the Shambhu border, Pandher said as far as the issue of modalities is concerned, any ordinance has a six-month validity. As far as the demand for "C2 plus 50 per cent" as per the Swaminathan Commission's recommendation goes, Pandher said that the government was giving a price according to "A2 plus FL" formula. On the issue of farm debt waiver, Pandher said the Centre is saying that the loan amount has to be assessed. —PTI

Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher addresses the media at Shambhu Border on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

Farmers to stage dharnas in 4 states

Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait on Saturday announced that farmers will stage dharnas in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Uttarakhand on 21 February over MSP. Tikait said a resolution was passed during the meeting asking the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) to launch a tractor march to Delhi in the last week of February if the government does not accept farmers' demands. Haryana Police on Friday fired tear gas shells to disperse protesting farmers when they moved towards the barricades at the Shambhu border near Ambala. Farmers claimed that the Haryana security personnel used "force" against protesters by hurling tear gas shells and firing rubber bullets. —PTI

100 farmers arrested in Thanjavur for staging 'rail roko'

Around 100 farmers from different farmers associations were arrested at Thanjavur Railway station on Saturday when they tried to stage a 'rail roko' protest in front of the Cholan Express. The group was protesting the police action against the farmers' agitation in New Delhi. —PTI

KERALA SCHOOLS GIVE WATER BREAKS AS MERCURY SOARS

T'PURAM, 17 FEB

Kerala government is planning to implement "waterbell" system at schools with an aim to ensure that students drink adequate water to keep the body hydrated during summers.

Kerala is the first state to introduce this system in the country, state General Education Minister's office said on Saturday.

Under the new initiative, the bell would be rung twice at 10.30am and 2.30pm in all schools to remind children to drink water. It will be implemented in schools from 20 February. Meanwhile, Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA) has issued an alert indicating above normal maximum temperature in four districts-Kannur, Kottayam, Kozhikode and Alappuzha- on Saturday.

"We implemented it for the first time in 2019 in schools, due to the high temperature levels there, the office said" —PTI

'NAUGHTY BOY' TAKES OFF

ISRO's INSAT-3DS to better India's meteorological system

SRIHARIKOTA,17 FEB

Moving ahead on its mission to study the Earth and ocean surfaces, ISRO on Saturday successfully launched its next generation weather observation satellite INSAT-3DS onboard a GSLV rocket into a precise orbit.

ISRO Chairman S Somanath said that with today's mission, ISRO's confidence on GSLV was "further high."

INSAT-3DS satellite, is a follow-on mission of the third generation meteorological satellite to be placed in a geostationary orbit and is funded by the Ministry of Earth Sciences. INSAT stands for Indian National Satellite System.

The rocket carries imager and sounder payloads, data relay transponders, satellite aidedR transponders which would be used to study cloud properties, fog, rainfall, snow cover and depth, fire, smoke, land and ocean among others.

The imager and sounder payloads incorporated in the mission are similar to those carried by INSAT-3D and INSAT-3DR, with significant improvements in radiometric performances, the space agency said.

"As all of you know, the next mission of the GSLV is going to be the NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) satellite and this gives greater confidence," for the next mission, he said.

According to ISRO, NISAR is a Low Earth Orbit (LEO) observatory being jointly developed by NASA and the Indian space agency. NISAR will map the entire globe in 12 days and provide spatially and temporally consistent data for understanding changes in Earth's ecosystems, ice mass, vegetation biomass, and sea level rise. —PTI

ISRO launched INSAT-3DS onboard a GSLV-F14 from Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota on Saturday PHOTO: PTI

INDIA BLASTS OFF WEATHER SATELLITE TO SPACE

Venue: Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota at 5.35 pm

- Meteorological satellite INSAT-3DS was launched into space by Geosynchronous Launch Vehicle (GSLV). This is GSLV's 16th mission
- GSLV is nick named 'naughty boy' for its spotty record

2,274 kg INSAT-3DS weighs

480 cr Cost

10 years Mission life

Placed in 36,647 km x 170 km elliptical orbit

Will take over INSAT-3D and 3DR (launched in 2013 & 2016) that have come to the end of their mission life

MISSION

- Advanced weather observations of land and ocean surfaces
- Short-range forecasts of extreme weather events such as thunderstorms
- Provide visibility estimation for aviation
- Help in studying forest fire, smoke, snow cover, climate
- Study cloud properties, fog, rainfall

10 killed in explosion at fireworks factory in TN

VIRUDHUNAGAR, 17 FEB

Ten people including four women were killed in an explosion at a fireworks factory in Virudhunagar district on Saturday.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin directed two state Ministers to coordinate the rescue and relief activities.

He has directed State Revenue Minister KKSSR Ramachandran and Labour Minister CV Ganesan to immediately rush to the spot and ensure rescue and relief activities, an official release said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed condolence over the deaths in the mishap in the district and announced that ex-gratia of Rs 2 lakh from PMNRF would be given to the next of kin of each deceased.

Expressing anguish over the accident, the Chief Minister conveyed his heartfelt condolences and sympathies to the bereaved families.

He has ordered a solatium of Rs 3 lakh each to the kin of the deceased and Rs one lakh to the grievously injured.

- The mishap occurred around 12.30pm on Saturday in the chemical mixing room of the firecracker making unit in the village.

The mishap occurred around 12.30pm on Saturday in the chemical mixing room of the firecracker making unit in the village. "Initially 9 persons died due to the explosion and 3 who were injured were rushed to Sivakasi Government Hospital for treatment," Virudhunagar district Collector VP Jayaseelan said.

Preliminary enquiry revealed that there was overcrowding in the chemical mixing room, and that the explosion could have been triggered when the chemical was being handled, he said. The factory owner had a licence.

Asked how the explosion happened, Collector replied "it could have been due to a human error. We have ordered a thorough enquiry by an inter-departmental team." —PTI

NIMHANS to organise mental health campaign

BENGALURU, 17 FEB

The Department of Mental Health Education of National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences here has announced that it will collaborate with others to hold a mega fair on mental health awareness on February 20 titled 'Mental Health Santhe 2.0'.In a release on Saturday, NIMHANS said this event is the first-of-its-kind as it focuses on mental health which is often overlooked in developing countries.NIMHANS said that in response to the challenges posed by mental health literacy and societal stigma, NIMHANS is taking a bold step forward with "Mental Health Santhe 2.0."This unique initiative aims to bridge the gap in mental health needs within the community, fostering increased knowledge about available services, reducing stigma, preventing suicides and enhancing mental health literacy."Collaborating with prominent mental health organisations and community partners, the event will witness the participation of key stakeholders, including Augmenta Health, Richmond Fellowship Society India, QPR Institute India, Nikisa Dementia Village and Alzheimer Hospital, Idare private limited and many more," the institute said.

—PTI

Haveri: Free specs to be given to 2.45L people today

BENGALURU/ MANGALURU, 17 FEB

State government will distribute glasses to 2.45 lakh people for free under Asha Kirana Yojana in Haveri district on Sunday after the inauguration of the initiative by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, said Health and Welfare Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao. Asha workers had examined the eyes of people, including children, in eight districts of the State in two phases, Rao said. In the first phase, a total of 56.5 lakh people across Haveri, Kalaburagi, Chamarajanagar and Chikkaballapur were subjected to primary screening. Of these, 8.28 lakh people were found to have eye-related problems and 2.45 lakh were found to have variations in their eyesight. Also, 39,336 people were found to have cataracts who will undergo surgery free of cost, the minister said.In the second phase, a primary screening was carried out on 52 lakh people across Chitradurga, Mandya, Raichur and Uttara Kannada districts. Of these, 9 lakh people were diagnosed with eye-related problems. For the next phase of the Asha Kirana project, Ramanagara, Yadgir, Kodagu, Gadag, Chikkamagaluru, Bidar, Kolar and Bagalkot districts were selected. The scheme will be extended to the remaining districts of the State in a phased manner. "Asha Kirana will bring light to many common people suffering from eye-related problems," Rao said in Mangaluru.Asha Kirana programme was started in September 2023.

—Salar News

St Gerosa school incident: Gundu Rao orders probe

MANGALURU, 17 FEB

An investigation by a senior bureaucrat has been ordered for a comprehensive investigation into the serious allegation that Sister Prabha, a teacher of St Gerosa School in Mangaluru in Dakshina Kannada district, had allegedly insulted a Hindu god, district in-charge minister Dinesh Gundu Rao, who is also the Health Minister, told reporters reporters on Saturday. Rao said, "No matter what their opinion or our opinion is, the law and constitution is what matters. We are hurt by the behaviour of BJP MLAs as they are trying to divide the society religiously."

—Salar News

CM says all must thwart efforts to undermine Constitution

Siddaramaiah said people who have no faith in law misleading others

BENGALURU, 17 FEB

Chief Minister on Saturday said the Constitution belongs to every citizen of the country and efforts to undermine its foundations must be thwarted.

While speaking to reporters here at the National Unity Convention, Siddaramaiah said some people have no faith and respect for the Constitution and hence, they are misleading people.

"Secularism, equality and fraternity are the foundations of the Constitution. It is the responsibility of every citizen to thwart attempts to undermine it," Siddaramaiah said.

Several rights mentioned in the Constitution would not have been possible without struggle, he said. "It has been 77 years since independence and 75 years since the Constitution was adopted, but not everyone has got all the rights," he said.

Even after all these years, inequality has not yet gone away from our society, he pointed out.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said there should be awareness about social equality ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

- Chief Minister on Saturday said the Constitution belongs to every citizen of the country and efforts to undermine its foundations must be thwarted

"There should be awareness about economic and social equality given by the Constitution," Siddaramaiah said.

The government is organising a statewide 'Constitution Awareness Jatha' (mass awareness) from 26 January to 23 February to mark the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution.

As part of it, the Constitution Conference and Expo will be organised on 24 and 25 February and a mega Constitution Awareness Convention on 25 February.

Highlighting that the government must create awareness about the Constitution, he said, "The Constitution enunciates tolerance and coexistence, but is it being upheld? Is 'Sab Ka Saath, Sab Ka Vikas' really happening?"

"If there is commitment and clarity in creating awareness about the Constitution, no one can mislead us. About 78 per cent of people are educated. But, even today educated people still believe in superstitions. We do not know rationality," he said.

—PTI

SUMMER IS HERE

Dry leaves spread like a carpet at Cubbon Park in Bengaluru on Saturday morning. The seasonal progression from winter to Summer is marked by the changing colours of leaves ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

Mekedatu issue: Palaniswami slams K'taka; questions DMK's 'silence'

CHENNAI, 17 FEB

AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami attacked the ruling Congress in Karnataka for announcing its decision to go ahead with Mekedatu reservoir and hit out at DMK government's alleged silence over the issue, on Saturday.

Karnataka government envisages constructing a balancing reservoir across river Cauvery at Mekedatu to meet Bengaluru's drinking water needs, but Tamil Nadu has been opposing it saying the project would harm its interests.

Palaniswami had already raised in state Assembly, previous AIADMK government filing a contempt plea in Supreme Court against Chief of the CWMA for taking up Mekedatu issue in CWMA agenda in 2018.

However, Mekedatu issue again came up before a CWMA meeting earlier this month, but Tamil Nadu did not walkout in protest against it.

AIADMK General Secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami charged Stalin with 'betraying' the people of Tamil Nadu ***PHOTO: PTI***

In this background, Karnataka government has announced going ahead with the project, while presenting its budget on Friday.

"This is against Supreme Court verdict and amounts to contempt of court. People really don't know what DMK government is waiting for. (Former chief minister M) Karunanidhi did not extend the agreement on Cauvery and allowed dams across the river in Karnataka, thus betraying the people of Tamil Nadu," he said.

He charged Stalin with 'betraying' the people of the state.

He warned of a massive protest, involving people and farmers, by his party against Congress government in Karnataka, Central and Tamil Nadu governments "that are mute witnesses" to the former's betrayal of Tamil Nadu if the project was not shelved immediately.

—PTI

'DEVELOPMENT IS STUNNED'

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar addresses a gathering at Congress meeting in Mangaluru on Saturday ***PHOTO: SALAR***

Cong will win coastal K'taka in LS polls: DKS

MANGALURU, 17 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said that he is confident that the people of the coastal region will vote for Congress in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, on Saturday in Mangaluru.

"Development is stunned, business transactions have declined, children are staying away from school and unemployment has increased. Hence, we are confident that voters in the coastal region will vote for us," he said.

Shivakumar said, "Nothing is permanent in politics, it is all an act of possibilities. As there is a problem of unemployment here, people from here are going to Bengaluru, Mumbai, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. It will all change after we win the Lok Sabha polls."

AICC President Mallikharjun Kharge, the General Secretaries of the party and other ministers were also present at the conference. The minister claimed that the students in Mangaluru are falling for the religious traps of BJP and are staying away from education. "BJP is prioritising emotional and religious issues over developmental works," Shivakumar said.

Shivakumar said that several rounds of discussions are being held to choose the candidates for the LS polls and another survey is going on, after that, the decision will be out.

Speaking about the budget, he said, "We have announced new policies for this region and the fishermen. "We have also allocated just 1 per cent of the budget for the Muslim community but BJP wants to create communal drama," Shivakumar said.

Regarding HD Kumaraswamy, JD(S) leader's candidature from Kanakapura against Congress MP and Shivakumar's brother DK Suresh, he said, "Let him come and contest." He said he is confident about his brother's contribution to the village people and they will vote for him.

—Salar News

BJP will win 22 LS seats in K'taka: Shettar

MYSURU, 17 FEB

Former chief minister Jagadish Shettar said private surveys have indicated BJP's victory in 22 of 28 parliamentary seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. He claimed that Narendra Modi would secure another term as prime minister as BJP has massive support in Karnataka.

He was talking to reporters after participating in a mural painting programme held in Medara Street, Nanjangud, on Saturday. He launched the 'Modi wall painting' initiative in the area.

Shettar said BJP has always been his political home and he re-joined the party as it resonates with his beliefs and values. He said that he was pursued by both Central and State BJP leaders to rejoin the party.

Jagadish Shettar ***PHOTO: ANI***

"Despite my brief stint with Congress, I encountered no issues with the party," he said.

"Should the senior leadership entrust me with the responsibility, I am prepared to contest in the parliamentary elections," he said.Before his wall graffiti, Shettar paid a visit to the Nanjundeshwara Temple.

—Salar News

80-yr-old woman rescued from year-long house confinement

TUMAKURU, 17 FEB

An 80-year-old woman, a retired child development officer, who had endured a year-long house confinement by her son and daughter-in-law, was rescued in Tumakuru on Saturday.

She was rescued with the help of Sakhi One Stop Centre and Senior Citizen Helpline.

The woman, whose identity remains undisclosed, was reportedly mistreated by her daughter-in-law

and son. The duo locked all the doors in the house to prevent her from leaving. Sakhi One Stop Centre and the Senior Citizens Helpline received a call regarding the woman's

condition. The officials faced resistance from the daughter-in-law during the rescue.

The 80-year-old woman was rescued with the help of Sakhi One Stop Centre in Tumakuru on Saturday ***PHOTO: SALAR***

Despite the challenge, the team rescued the woman and took her to the district hospital for medical attention.

The team planned to relocate the elderly woman to an official shelter, but she wanted to return to

her own home. District Legal Services Authority Secretary and Justice Nurunneesa accompanied by the police ensured her safe return home and threatened the family with legal action if they mistreated the woman again.

—Salar News

Hubballi riots: Union Min slams Congress

HUBBALLI/ BENGALURU, 17 FEB

Union Minister Pralhad Joshi on Saturday said Congress government will have to pay a heavy price for ensuring the release of the accused in the Hubballi riot case.

Speaking to the media in Hubballi, Joshi said, "Congress government has always been sympathetic to the accused of the Hubballi riot incident. The government did not place the arguments strongly so that the accused could be released."

Karnataka High Court on Friday had granted bail to 106 people in the Hubballi riot case. However, three accused are still in jail. The bench headed by Justice Srinivas Harish Kumar and Justice Venkatesh Naik passed the judgement.

Joshi claimed that the letter was submitted demanding their release on an immediate basis which built the pressure. This is all happening after Congress came to power, said Joshi.

On 16 April, 2022, violence erupted in Hubballi city over a photoshopped picture of a religious flag hoisted on a mosque as WhatsApp status which sparked outrage. An mob had attacked people and a police station, damaging 10 police vehicles in the process while injuring a police inspector and six cops. Police had arrested 152 people in connection with the violence.

35 were granted bail earlier by the Supreme Court and the minors in connection with the case were also released later. *—Salar News*

Chariot on 250-yr-old stone wheels rolls on in Kolar

DEEPTHI RANGANATH KOLAR, 17 FEB

The newly built wooden chariot that was drawn using over two-century-old stone wheels at Sri Lakshmi Narayanaswamy Temple at Holur in Kolar district rolled on during Rathothsava on Friday.

The 25-feet chariot was built using crowdfunding with octogenarian devotee Maruthi of Jawali family and Shanthamani of Sahukar Sesha Iyengar family contributing a lion's share of the funds.

The temple was founded by great philosopher Sri Vyasaraja around 500 years ago and the car festival was an annual feature in the village for centuries. The village was previously called Vyasarayapuri after the great philosopher. However, at some point in time, the 250-year-old stone wheels were replaced with wooden ones; and the former were left unused, said Krishna Prasad, a seer.

As the wheels were left unused, the devotees came together to build a wooden chariot to bring the age-old stone wheels back to glory. The new chariot was built using well-seasoned Matti wood and iron sleeves were used to prevent corrosion of the wheels, said Prasad, a driver in the village. Each wheel has a diameter of over four feet and the girth is around half a foot.

PHOTO: SALAR

HR Ravi of Javali family said his great-grandfather Srinivasa Iyengar used to say that hundreds of people from various villages used to pull the chariot. HS Ramaraj of Sahukar family, who resides in Bengaluru, said his forefathers were the seva karthas of Kashi Yathre and Kalyanothsava of the temple, while the Javali family members were the seva karthas of the car festival.

Kolar MP S Muniswamy took part in the Rathotsava on Friday along with BJP leaders and assured the villagers that he would assist them in the development of the temple. *—Salar News*

₹300 PER KILO SOON

Chicken price goes through the roof

BENGALURU, 17 FEB

Chicken lovers in Bengaluru may soon see a hole in their pockets as prices of meat continue to get higher day by day. The rise in demand for chicken meat, the increase in feed costs along with premature deaths of chickens have all contributed to the price rise, according to poultry dealers in the City.

The price of chicken that were around Rs 220 per kilogram in January has increased to Rs 280/kg now and will rise to Rs 300/kg by March. "If the demand for chicken increases and the supply decreases or stays the same, the prices could rise," said Mohammad Waseem, the manager of Karnataka Chicken Centre which has a couple of outlets in the City. "The prices will automatically come down if the supply gets better. The prices may vary from store to store."

The price of chicken has increased to Rs 280/kg now and will rise to Rs 300/kg by March ***PHOTO: PTI***

The supply of live chicken from suburbs of the City has come down, said Riyaz Ali from SLN Chicken Centre told **Salar News.** "Also, we have seen a significant rise in customers in our store for the past few weeks," Ali said.

The cost of the feed given to chickens has been on the upswing for the last couple of days, pushing up the price of the chicken. "The maize and soya seeds are the staple feed for chickens and we buy them in bulk orders. The price of 50kg of maize, which was around Rs 950 a couple of weeks before, has shot up to Rs 1,500. The price for 50kg of soya seeds too increased, touching around Rs 2,050 now. This is why we charge more for the chicken meat as well," said Nallappa Gowda, the caretaker of KH Krishnegowda poultry farm in the City.

The boneless chicken in Bengaluru, which was priced at Rs 300/kg at the beginning of the year, has increased to Rs 520/kg now. Prices for live chicken, country chicken and skinless chicken vary in different places in Bengaluru.

However, this price increase will not affect the chicken dishes served in eateries in the City. "Even though the prices of the meat have increased, we will not make any changes in the prices of the chicken dishes in restaurants and hotels.

Those prices will remain the same," said PC Rao, President of Bruhath Bangalore Hotels Association. *—Salar News*

14-YEAR-OLD GIRL MARRIED OFF TO MAN IN B'LURU

BENGALURU, 17 FEB

A shocking case of child marriage has been reported in Bengaluru. A 14 year old girl tied the knot with a 24 year old man on 15 February. The girl's paternal aunt and paternal uncle hosted the marriage without informing the girl's parents.

The girl's mother registered a complaint against the paternal aunt, paternal uncle, grandmother at the Sarjapur Police station and demanded legal action. The mother said, "My daughter is still a minor and has been forced to marry a 24 year old. The marriage was conducted at the Yellamma temple in Kaiser. The bride has been given off to Vinod Kumar of Halasinakaipura. His parents Muniyappa and Ratnamma and brother Vijay Kumar and his wife have carried out rituals." *—Salar News*

IT dept freezes Cong-backed news channel accounts

T'PURAM, 17 FEB

The management of Congress-backed Jaihind TV in Kerala on Saturday alleged that its bank accounts were frozen by Centre, a day after the national party's main bank accounts were frozen by I-T department over an outstanding tax demand. According to sources in TV channel, the office of Assistant Commissioner, Central GST and Central Excise in Thiruvananthapuram issued notices to two leading private banks, directing them to recover the amount due to central government from the news channel's parent company, Bharat Broadcasting Company, leading to the freeze of its accounts. Jaihind TV was recently in the news after CBI issued a notice seeking details of the investments made in the channel by Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar in connection with a disprportionate assets case against Congress leader. *—PTI*

Greek PM Mitsotakis to visit India next week

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis will pay a two-day state visit to India from 21 February with an aim to further deepen the strategic partnership between the two countries. It would be the first visit to India by a head of state of Greece to India after a gap of 15 years.India-Greece relations were elevated to 'strategic partnership' during Modi's visit to Greece in August last year. Mitsotakis will be the chief guest and keynote speaker at the Raisina Dialogue in the national capital, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Saturday, announcing his visit.Greek Prime Minister will be accompanied by senior officials and a high-powered business delegation."Prime Minister Mitsotakis's visit is expected to further strengthen and deepen the strategic partnership between India and Greece," the MEA said. *—PTI*

Assam Congress expells Dadu Taye from party

GUWAHATI, 17 FEB

Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) President Bhupen Bora on Saturday suspended the party's Golaghat district President Dadu Taye for alleged anti-party activities. Taye was seen felicitating Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma with a traditional shawl on Thursday and after a picture of it went viral, he was served with a show-cause notice. The District President was expelled from the party after he failed to give a satisfactory reply, according to an order by the state Congress President. Taye claimed that he had gone to meet the chief minister for a personal reason. Sarma was on a visit to Jorhat district on 14 February and had stayed in a village there for the night as part of 'Gaon Chalo' (Visiting villages) programme. His expulsion comes close on the heels of two Congress MLAs, Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha and Basanta Das, extending "unconditional support" to BJP government in the state without leaving the grand old party.*—PTI*

Ex-BJD leader Panigrahi likely to join BJP

BHUBANESHWAR, 17 FEB

Pradeep Panigrahi, the former Biju Janata Dal (BJD) leader and MLA representing Gopalpur, hinted at the likelihood of joining BJP. Panigrahi revealed that a meeting took place between him and BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) state President Manmohan Samal, where they discussed crucial political issues in the state. When questioned about whether Samal had extended an invitation to join BJP, Panigrahi confirmed, "Yes, there was a fruitful discussion, and we are waiting for the right time to reveal the facts. Many issues were discussed." Panigrahi said. *—ANI*

Buzz about Kamal Nath joining BJP gets louder

Meanwhile, his son Nakul drops Congress from his X bio

NEW DELHI/BHOPAL, 17 FEB

Former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Kamal Nath interacts with media, in New Delhi on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

The buzz over senior Congress leader Kamal Nath's possible switch to BJP grew louder on Saturday with the former Madhya Pradesh chief minister saying if there would be any such thing, he would inform the media first, and his son Nakul Nath dropping Congress from his bio on social media.

Congress leaders from Madhya Pradesh, however, stressed on the decades-old ties between Kamal and the party to dismiss the speculation that he may cross over to the BJP. Madhya Pradesh Congress chief Jitu Patwari recalled how former prime minister Indira Gandhi had described Nath as her "third son".

Kamal arrived in the national capital Saturday afternoon and in his brief interaction with reporters here, he asked them not to get excited.Asked if he is joining BJP, Kamal said, "If there would be any such thing, I would inform you first." When a reporter asked if he was not denying a possible switch, Kamal said, "It is not about denying, you are saying this, you people are getting excited. I am not getting excited, this side or that side."Kamal had been on a tour of his bastion Chhindwara, from where he had been an MP for nine terms. His son Nakul Nath won the seat in the 2019 polls, even as BJP swept the remaining 28 seats in the state. Patwari dismissed the speculation that the party veteran may jump the ship to join BJP.

Kamal's colleague in the party and former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijaya Singh also rubbished the rumours and dubbed them a "media creation". Patwari told reporters, "Can you dream of the third son of Indiraji (Gandhi) joining the BJP?" He said Kamal stood behind Congress like a rock during the bad patch when the government led by him was toppled by Jyotiraditya Scindia after joining BJP in March 2020. Singh suggested that Kamal who started his political innings with the Nehru-Gandhi family could never leave the party.Meanwhile, adding to the buzz about Kamal's possible switch to BJP, his MP son Nakul dropped Congress from his bio on social media.

Nakul's move has added fuel to rumours swirling for the last few days that he, along with his father, are defecting to BJP. The bio of Nakul on X now identifies him only as a Member of Parliament, Chhindwara.

—PTI

'Irregularities' when RJD was sharing power: Nitish

PATNA, 17 FEB

Nitish Kumar also said that he agreed that BJP-led coalition will win more than 400 seats in the coming Lok Sabha polls *PHOTO: PTI*

- Government has asked top officials to review the decisions taken by former RJD Ministers, Lalit Yadav and Ramanand Yadav in the previous government

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar asserted that he has come to know about many irregularities that took place when RJD was sharing power with JD(U) and these were now being investigated.

In a letter, dated 16 February, issued by Cabinet Secretariat department, headed by Chief Minister, officials of Health, Road Construction, Urban Development and Housing and Rural Works departments have been asked to review the decisions taken during the previous grand alliance government in the state. These departments were headed by Tejashwi Yadav.

Besides, government has also asked top officials of Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) and Mines and Geology Department to review the decisions taken by former RJD Ministers, Lalit Yadav and Ramanand Yadav in the previous government.

JD (U) chief downplayed RJD president Lalu Prasad's assertion that "doors are always open" for him and said he always maintains good relations with allies as well as those in the opposition.

Kumar, who has now joined NDA also said, he agreed with the forecast of Prime Minister, that BJP-led coalition will win more than 400 seats in the coming Lok Sabha polls. "Yes, BJP will definitely win more seats this time compared to Lok Sabha seats it won in the 2019 polls, Mujhe Pura Bharosa Hai (I am fully confident)".

When asked about cracks in Opposition INDIA alliance, Kumar said, "They (leaders of INDIA bloc) were not doing anything, that is the reason that cracks are developing in the alliance. The name (INDIA) given to this alliance was not my choice at all. They decided on their own. Now, I have nothing to do with them, I am back here (NDA)". *—PTI*

Sunetra Pawar might contest against Supriya

PUNE, 17 FEB

Sunetra Pawar, Supriya Sule *PHOTO: FB/PTI*

Publicity campaign vehicles in Baramati showcased pictures of NCP Chief Ajit Pawar and his wife Sunetra Pawar, even as speculation continued on her being the candidate of the NCP (Ajit Pawar) for the constituency in the Lok Sabha.

Sunetra is a social worker by profession and hails from a political family. Her brother is senior politician and former minister, Padamsinh Patil. Reacting to the possibility of Sunetra contesting from Baramati Supriya Sule said that in a democracy everyone has a right to contest elections.

This constituency that was represented repeatedly by Sharad Pawar is currently represented by his daughter Supriya Sule. The campaign vehicle carried a banner with photographs of Sunetra Pawar and Ajit with the symbol of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The slogan on the banner read 'One aim, all-round development' with no details of candidature or constituency.

The Baramati Lok Sabha segment has traditionally been a bastion of Sharad Pawar and his daughter Supriya Sule. Sule was first elected to the Rajya Sabha in 2006, followed by three consecutive terms in 2009, 2014 and 2019 as a Member of Parliament in Lok Sabha. Speaking on the speculations of Sunetra Pawar's candidature against her, Sule said, "It is a democracy, so everybody has the right to contest."While Sharad said that everybody has the right to present their side. "In a democracy, everyone has the right to stand in elections. If someone is exercising that right, then there is no reason to complain about it. We should put our position before the people. People know what we have done in the last 55-60 years," senior Pawar said.

"If someone is running for Lok Sabha, then this it is their right. They have the right to present their side. We accept this," he added. Ajit on Friday said, "Since the formation of Maharashtra state and the commencement of elections till date, it has never happened in Baramati that the deposit of opposition candidate was not forfeited. And I am proud of it." *—ANI*

Child rights panel visits Sandeshkhali

KOLKATA, 17 FEB

A six-member team of the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights (WBCPCR) on Saturday visited Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district to ascertain complaints of child abuse in the politically troubled area.

Villagers alleged that a seven-month-old child was snatched from her mother's lap and thrown away by miscreants in Sandeshkhali.The child is now under treatment in a state-run medical facility.

Advisor to the state child rights panel Sudeshna Roy told reporters, "We have come to ground zero to assess the situation. Our duty is to give protection to every child in the state and also see their rights are protected".

"We will talk to the mother of the child who was allegedly tortured", she said.

The six-member team of the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights which visited Sandeshkhali was led by its chairperson Tulika Das.

Das said that on Friday, they got to know that some person barged into the house and threw the child from the mother's lap.

Earlier, representatives of the National Commission for Women and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes also visited the area.

Tension started brewing in Sandeshkhali after the ED went to the area to search the premises of local Trinamool Congress leader Sheikh Shajahan in connection with an alleged ration scam more than a month ago. The Trinamool Congress leader is still at large.

The village has been witnessing protests over alleged atrocities, including sexual abuse, by some TMC leaders against villagers that has triggered a fierce political blame game. *—PTI*

MUNICH SECURITY CONFERENCE

Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar interacts with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Munich on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

HP budget: CM misleading people, says Jai Ram Thakur

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Jai Ram Thakur *PHOTO: PTI*

In his first response to the state budget presented by Chief Minister Sukhwinder Sukhu on Saturday, the Leader of Opposition in the Himachal Assembly, Jai Ram Thakur, on Saturday said the former and his party are 'infamous' for making 'false guarantees'.

"This was the second budget to be presented by Congress government in Himachal Pradesh. No work has been done on 95 per cent of the projects that were outlined and announcements made in the last budget. The budget presented today was, more or less, a rehash of the one presented last year. They did not act on the promises made last time. None of the schemes announced in the last budget was implemented," the former chief minister said."The Chief Minister and the party that he represents have become infamous for their false guarantees. First, they lied to the people to grab power and then made a host of false promises in their inaugural budget.

Not a single scheme announced in the first budget has been implemented to this day. Now, with the general elections around the corner, they have made some more announcements in their second budget", he said.

—ANI

JD(U) backs simultaneous polls

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) on Saturday supported holding simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies but not with local body polls.It told the high-level committee on 'one nation, one election' that it supports holding Lok Sabha and state assembly polls together.It also said that all local body polls -- municipalities and panchayats -- should be held together. However, the local body polls should not be held alongside elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, it underlined.

"... JD(U) would like to extend its support of having simultaneous elections in House of People (Lok Sabha), state legislature together and the election for the third tier, that is, Panchayats and Municipalities should be held simultaneously but separately and not with House of People and state legislature," the JD(U) told the panel headed by former president Ram Nath Kovind.The committee is mandated to examine and make recommendations for holding simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha, state assemblies, keeping in view the existing constitutional framework. *—PTI*

J'khand Cong MLAs unhappy with new cabinet

RANCHI, 17 FEB

As eight ministers took oath in new Champai Soren cabinet in Jharkhand, some Congress MLAs have expressed discontent with the expansion that allegedly excluded new faces which was their demand.Congress MLA Dipika Pandey Singh claimed that they presented their thoughts before the cabinet expansion happened. "Our demand was that if new government was being formed and the cabinet was being reshuffled, then new faces should have been given a chance," Singh said. Congress MLA Anup Singh said that MLAs have intimated Pradesh Congress Committee president about their concern and their demand remains the same. After meeting the party MLAs after the swearing-in ceremony, Jharkhand Congress President Rajesh Thakur said that the party will discuss the matter."They had expressed their feelings even before the oath-taking ceremony. They were unhappy, they had gone to the swearing-in ceremony at our request. We are aware of their feelings. We will discuss it," Thakur said. Meanwhile, BJP MP Nishikant Dubey slammed the JMM-led alliance in the state of not including a Scheduled Caste member in the new cabinet. *—ANI*

Protest disrupts supply chain in Delhi

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Vegetable prices in Delhi could be headed for a rise as farmers' protests disrupt supply chains, according to a trader at Ghazipur Mandi as the farmers' protests continued for the fifth day.A vegetable trader at Ghazipur mandi said, "The price of carrots has gone up by Rs 4 in the last 15 days after supply from Punjab was disrupted. This could lead to a rise in the price of vegetables." The protesting farmers have been camping at the border points since the start of the March on Tuesday, 13 February.However, another trader stated that there has been no immediate impact on prices so far. While, another vegetable trader at Ghazipur Mandi said, "There is no impact on the prices of vegetables currently. If protests continue and there are more road blockages, then the supply of vegetables from UP, Ganganagar, Pune, etc. may get affected leading to a possible hike in the price of some vegetables."

A vegetable seller in Ghazipur corroborating to the current stability in prices, said, "The trucks carrying vegetables are reaching Delhi on time without any disruptions till now. The vegetable prices have not been affected so far." *—ANI*

IN SOLIDARITY

Haryana farmers protest outside BJP leaders' homes

CHANDIGARH, 17 FEB

Farmers at the Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border during farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' protest, near Patiala district, on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

- In Punjab, the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) held dharnas outside the residences of former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh in Patiala, BJP's Punjab unit chief Sunil Jakhar in Abohar and senior party leader Kewal Singh Dhillon in Barnala

Bhartiya Kisan Union (Charuni) on Saturday took out a tractor march in Haryana while BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) held dharnas outside residences of three senior BJP leaders. This was in support of farmers protesting at the borders of Punjab over their various demands..

The farmers from Punjab began their march to Delhi on Tuesday but were stopped by security personnel at the Shambhu and Khanauri points of Punjab's border with Haryana. The protesters have stayed put at the two border points since then.

The Gurnam Singh Charuni-led faction, which is based in Haryana, took out tractor marches at several places including Kurukshetra, Yamunanagar and Sirsa in solidarity with the protesting farmers.

In Kurukshetra, Charuni led the tractor march at Pehowa. It started from the Grain market and took out the march in the town.

Over 150 tractors participated in the march and the protesters were raising slogans against the government and in favour of farmers' unity.

He said a 'mahapanchayat' of farm organisations, and labour and sarpanch unions will be held on Sunday at Kurukshetra to chalk out their further course of action to support the protesting farmers.

In Punjab, the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) held dharnas outside the residences of former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh in Patiala, BJP's Punjab unit chief Sunil Jakhar in Abohar and senior party leader Kewal Singh Dhillon in Barnala.

The farmer body also held protests at 21 toll plazas in 13 districts in the state, extending support to the farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' call. They forced the authorities not to charge any toll fee from commuters.

The BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) will continue their protests on Sunday also. *—PTI*

PHOTO: Instagram/@swadhyayee Chaudhary

Veteran actor Anjana Bhowmik dies at 79

KOLKATA, 17 FEB

Popular actor of yesteryears Anjana Bhowmick died on Saturday, family sources said. She was 79. Anjana who had been ailing for some time died at a private hospital at around 10:30 am. She was admitted to the hospital due to respiratory problems on 16 February. She had been bedridden due to geriatric problems in recent months. A popular actor from '60s-80s period, Anjana had earned audience acclaim in classics like 'Kakhono Megh' (cloud after sunshine), 'Thana theke aschhi' (coming from police station), 'Nayika Sangbad' (tale of a heroine), 'Chowringhee', 'Pratham Basanta' (first spring) among others. Having stepped into the film world at the age of 20, Anjana was noticed in the film 'Anustup Chhanda' in 1964 and came to be known as Anjana from her original name Arati. The next year with 'Thana theke aschhi' she was catapulted into the league of big names in Bengali film industry. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

'Dangal' child star Suhani Bhatnagar dies at 19

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Suhani Bhatnagar, who played young Babita Phogat in Aamir Khan-starrer wrestling drama "Dangal", has died at the age of 19. Reports suggested she suffered medical complications after a leg fracture and was later admitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences on 7 February. The Faridabad-born actor became a prominent face after appearing in the 2016 biographical drama about a wrestler who mentors his two daughters to success. Zaira Wasim played young Geeta while Bhatnagar portrayed the role of Babita. The grown-up versions of the characters were played by Fatima Sana Shaikh and Sanya Malhotra. *—PTI*

5 get life term for rape, murder of minor in UP

MAHARAJGANJ, 17 FEB

A court has sentenced five men to life imprisonment after convicting them in a case of gang rape and murder of a 12-year-old girl. Special Public Prosecutor Vinod Singh said that court of Additional Sessions, Judge Vinay Kumar Singh on Friday sentenced five men -- Pankaj Sahni, Vivek, Govind Chauhan, Sonu and Ram Narayan Rajbhar -- all in their late twenties in a 2021 case of the minor girl's gang rape and murder. The court also imposed a fine of Rs 90,000 on each of the convicts. According to police, the victim was strangled to death after being raped by the accused at Khalikgar village under Purendarpur police station in the district on 18 January, 2021.*—PTI*

4 bodies recovered from rail tracks in Jharkhand

CHAKRADHARPUR, 17 FEB

Bodies of four people including a woman and two children were recovered from railway tracks in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum district on Saturday. The incident took place between Kendaposi-Talaburu stations in Chakradharpur division of South Eastern Railway, P Shankar Kutty, Commandant, Railway Protection Force (RPF), Chakradharpur division, said. Though the incident was being investigated, prima facie it seemed to be a case of murder, he said. The victims, apparently belonging to the same family, were suspected to have been murdered and the bodies dumped on the tracks. *—PTI*

Hartal against wild animal attacks turns violent in Kerala

Angry agitators blocked major routes connecting state to Karnataka

WAYANAD, 17 FEB

The district-wide hartal called by the ruling LDF, opposition UDF and BJP to seek permanent solutions to the man-animal conflicts in the region turned violent in Pulpally on Saturday. Protesters damaged a Forest department vehicle and tying atop it a cow that was killed in a suspected tiger attack earlier in the day.

Despite blocking the road to other parts of the state, the locals at Pulpally stopped a forest department vehicle and an angry mob damaged the vehicle.

They tore away the soft top of the jeep and punctured the tyre.

People had gathered at Pulpally in large numbers with the body of Paul, an eco-tourism guide of the forest department who died after being attacked by a wild tusker near Kuruva island on Friday.

Angry agitators blocked the vehicular traffic along the major routes in the district that connect Karnataka and other parts of the state.

The protesters also placed a wreath on the forest department's vehicle alleging that the officials were unable to protect the life and property of the people.

Later, a section of protesters brought the carcass of a cow killed in a tiger attack earlier in the day, on a tractor and tied it to the bonnet of the Forest Department vehicle.

The Chief Minister intervened in the matter in the wake of intense protests staged by local people seeking solutions to address frequent attacks by stray wild animals in human settlements in the high range district.

Meanwhile, shops and business establishments remained closed while vehicles kept off the roads today across Wayanad districts in view of the hartal call.

Major towns like

Protesters damaged a forest department vehicle and tied a cow atop that was killed in a suspected tiger attack on Saturday *PHOTO: X/ @BAIJUANNAN*

Rahul pauses yatra to visit Wayanad after violence

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Rahul Gandhi is leaving for Wayanad from Varanasi as he is urgently required in his Lok Sabha constituency and will resume his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra from Prayagraj on Sunday, the party said.

Gandhi's visit to Wayanad comes a day after a man, who was seriously injured in another wild elephant attack on Friday morning, died at the Kozhikode medical college during the day. *—PTI*

KERALA CM DIRECTS HOLDING MINISTERS' MEET

T'PURAM, 17 FEB

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Saturday gave a direction to convene a high level meeting under the aegis of ministers to discuss issues related to frequent man-animal conflicts in Wayanad district.As per the directive, Revenue, Forest and Local Self Government Department (LSGD) ministers would jointly convene a meeting in Wayanad district on February 20.

All peoples' representatives including civic body councillors of Wayanad besides higher officials would participate in the meeting, a statement from the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) here said.

He intervened in the matter in the wake of intense protests staged by local people seeking solutions to address frequent attacks by stray wild animals in human settlements in the high range district.

CAG says T'gana Kaleshwaram project unviable

HYDERABAD, 17 FEB

A report of Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) revealed that benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of Kaleshwaram irrigation project was inflated, and the entire programme was economically unviable.

This is a potential blow for the erstwhile K Chandrashekhar Rao-led BRS government in Telangana.

The cost of Kaleshwaram project, which was initially estimated at Rs 81,911.01 crore, is now likely to exceed Rs 1,47,427.41 crore, with a cost overrun of about 80 per cent, the audit report tabled on Thursday said.

Even with the understated project cost of Rs 81,911.01 crore, benefit-cost ratio works out to be 0.75. Considering the latest likely project cost of Rs 1,47,427.41 crore, BCR works out to 0.52.

"This means that every rupee spent on the project would yield only 52 paise. It clearly indicates that the project was, ab-initio, economically unviable," audit report stated.

"Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) of the project was inflated by overstating the value of project benefits and understating the annual costs."

The audit report into the big-ticket irrigation scheme revealed that Government of Telangana did not accord administrative approval for the project, and instead issued separate approvals -- as many as 73 administrative approvals aggregating to Rs 1,10,248.48 crore.

56 contracts were awarded under work for Kaleshwaram project. The progress of project work is slow.

"Out of the 56 works, only 12 works were completed, 40 works were ongoing with progress ranging from 3 per cent to 99 per cent while 4 works have not even commenced, as of March 2022.

As against the total value of civil works of Rs 1,02,267.99 crore, the progress achieved was Rs 70,666.48 crore (i.e., 69 per cent)," the report read.

The delay in completion of works was mainly due to revisions in the scope of works and delays in finalisation of scope of works/designs/drawing and land acquisition, it argued. *—ANI*

MP pregnant woman set ablaze after gangrape

MORENA, 17 FEB

A 34-year-old pregnant woman was allegedly raped by three men and set on fire in Madhya Pradesh's Morena district, and is battling for her life in a hospital, police said on Saturday.

The victim, who sustained 80 per cent burns, is undergoing treatment in Gwalior, an official said.

The incident occurred in Chand Ka Pura village, around 3 km from Ambah town, on Friday, he said.

The victim went to the village to work out a compromise with a woman who had accused her husband of rape, inspector Alok Parihar of Ambah police station told PTI.

The victim was, however, allegedly raped by three men who were present in the woman's house. Later, the trio and the accused woman poured fuel on her and set her ablaze, the official said.

A video has been shared with the police in which the victim, being rushed to a hospital in a vehicle, is heard saying that she was first gang raped, and then the accused woman and the men had set her ablaze, he said.

The victim's husband, who is out on bail in the rape case, has handed the video to the police, Parihar said.

While the victim has recorded her statement with the magistrate, the police were yet to record her statement, he said, adding that the investigations are underway. *—PTI*

WHAT HAVE WE COME TO?

Candidates of Uttar Pradesh Police Constables exams sleep on a footpath due to their heavy rush, in Kanpur on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

HALDWANI CURFEW RELAXED TEMPORARILY

NAINITAL, 17 FEB

Authorities have temporarily relaxed curfew in Banbhoolpura of Haldwani City, which was imposed following violence, that broke out on 8 February after an "illegal structure" was demolished as part of an anti-encroachment drive.

"However, night curfew will continue from 8pm to 6am in Gaujajali, FSI, Godown area. The night curfew will continue in the rest of the areas under Banbhoolpura police station from 5pm to 6am," Nanital Police posted on X.

The curfew was imposed and the administration issued shoot-at-sight orders after stone-pelting incidents, torching of vehicles and a mob surrounded local police station following the anti-encroachment drive. *—ANI*

Churachandpur back to normal after tribal body lifts 'shutdown'

Police forces deployed in Manipur amid violence` *PHOTO: ANI*

IMPHAL, 17 FEB

The situation in Manipur's Churachandpur town, where two people were killed in a clash with security forces two days ago, returned to normal on Saturday after Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) lifted the "total shutdown" in the southern district.

Schools reopened and markets and business establishments have resumed activities. However, the indefinite "public curfew" imposed by Kuki Student Organisation (KSO) and other student organisations across the district from 6pm to 6am will continue.

Meanwhile, isolated incidents of gunfire continue to pour in from the peripheral villages of the hill district adjoining the valley, officials said.

On Thursday night, a mob had barged into the mini-secretariat in Churachandpur town to protest the suspension of the constable. Constable Siamlalpaul was suspended after he was seen in a purported video with armed men, which had gone viral.

There were reports of destruction and burning of properties in and around Churachandpur district mini-secretariat area.

The official residence of Deputy Commissioner was also torched by the irate mob around 1am on Friday.

ITLF has demanded that district SP Shivanand Surve and DC S Dharun Kumar should leave the district and be replaced by "officers preferably from Kuki Zo community". *—PTI*

JAWAN INJURED IN GUN ATTACK IN KAKCHING

IMPHAL, 17 FEB

A BSF jawan was injured in a gun attack in Manipur's Kakching district on Saturday. Injured head constable Som Dutt, 45, is from Himachal Pradesh. Dutt suffered injuries on his left shoulder when he was hit by a bullet at Sugnu village.

He was admitted to a private hospital.

"There have been consistent attacks by armed men for the last three days at Sugnu. On Friday night, they fired from the hill slopes using medium machine guns," officials added.

On Wednesday, armed men attacked Sugnu village, triggering a gunfight with village volunteers stationed in the area. Last May, Sugnu witnessed severe violence, resulting in the burning of numerous houses and the loss of more than five lives, which compelled hundreds of villagers to seek refuge in relief camps. *—PTI*

Structure collapses at Delhi's Nehru Stadium, 25 rescued

NDRF team during rescue and relief work after a temporary tent collapsed at JLN Stadium, in New Delhi, Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

At least 25 people trapped under the collapsed marriage 'pandal' (temporary structure or tent) at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium were rescued on Saturday, officials said.

According to Delhi Police, the collapse incident took place near the stadium's Gate No 2 at around 11.15 am.

Upon receiving information, Delhi Fire Services Department officials, along with fire tenders, reached the spot and started an operation to rescue people trapped under the pandal.

Meanwhile, a team of Delhi police officials also reached the spot.

Speaking to the media, DCP South Ankit Chauhan said that a call was received about the collapse of a pandal/tent and the possibility of a few labourers trapped under it. "Around 25-30 labourers were trapped under the fallen structure. The pandal was erected for a wedding function," he said. Chauhan said that labourers were working under it when it collapsed.

- Upon receiving information, Delhi Fire Services Department officials, along with fire tenders, reached the spot and started an operation to rescue people trapped under the pandal.

"Locals and sportspeople present at the spot came to help and rescued people. It was a 30x60 sq ft pandal set up, and the booking was done under the name of one Rajesh," he said.

"Over 25 people were rescued and shifted to AIIMS Trauma Centre and Safdarjung Hospital. A search and rescue operation is underway," he said. *—ANI*

TAMIL NADU MAN CHARGESHEETED FOR LTTE REVIVAL

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

National Investigation Agency (NIA) has filed a charge sheet in a special court in Tamil Nadu against one more accused in a case related to the revival of LTTE in Sri Lanka and India.

Lingam A alias Adilingam is 14th accused to be charge-sheeted in the case registered in 2022 in which 16 people have been arraigned as accused so far, the anti-terror federal agency said. Adilingam has been charged with conspiring and acting to revive the proscribed terror organisation through illegal trade in narcotic drugs and arms.

The chargesheet reveals that the accused was employed as a production executive in Tamil film industry while clandestinely working as a key operative of major LTTE leaders and cadres including Gunasekaran and his son Thilipan -- both citizens of Sri Lanka. *—ANI*

HOUSED WITH 'AKBAR'

VHP moves HC over naming of lioness as 'Sita'

SILIGURI, 17 FEB

Vishwa Hindu Parishad has filed a petition before the Jalpaiguri Circuit Bench of Calcutta High Court claiming that a lioness transferred to Bengal Safari Park here from Tripura was named "Sita" and prayed that the name be changed, VHP's lawyer said on Saturday. The park authorities, however, denied that any such name was given by it to the lioness.

Two lions were brought from Tripura's Sepahijala Zoological Park on February 12. The lion was named "Akbar", the VHP claimed.

The VHP's north Bengal unit filed the petition on 16 February and the matter is likely to be heard on 20 February before a single bench of the court, petitioner's advocate on record Subhankar Dutta told PTI.

PHOTO: PIXABAY

He said the petitioner has prayed that the name of the lioness be changed as such naming of an animal may hurt religious sentiments.

- It was also urged that no animal in any zoological park be named after gods and goddesses of any religion in future, Dutta said.

It was also urged that no animal in any zoological park be named after gods and goddesses of any religion in future, Dutta said.

The parishad's north Bengal unit said it learnt from media reports that a lion and lioness with markings as IL26 and IL27, respectively, arrived at the Bengali Safari Park as part of an animal exchange programme and that the lioness was named "Sita". The park authorities asserted it had not named the two animals and the official naming was awaited. *—PTI*

20 stray dogs found dead in Telangana

MAHABUBNAGAR, 17 FEB

Telangana Police said a probe has been initiated into the incident in which over 20 stray dogs were found dead in a village in state's Mahabubnagar district, on Saturday.

According to locals, the incident took place at Ponnakal village, Addakal mandal of Mahabubnagar, late on Friday. After the incident came to light, a group of animal activists approached police and lodged a complaint. They alleged that some masked men arrived in a car after midnight and opened fire on the strays. They claimed that around 20 stray dogs were shot dead, and several others were injured. Police said that they have received a complaint. *—ANI*

FARMERS' PROTEST

A police personnel guards at the Delhi- Gurugram border near Sirhaul toll plaza in view of farmers' 'Delhi Chalo march, in Gurugram; Farmers from various unions prepare langar during their Bharat Bandh call; A farmer shows his injury caused due to the firing of tear gas; Paramilitary personnel monitor the traffic movement at the Ghazipur border in view of the protest march; Security personnel guard at the Punjab-Haryana Shambhu border as a farmer stands in the foreground during march ***PHOTO: PTI/ANI***

Blueprint for anti-Putin activism will live on forever

Long lines of Russians endured subzero temperatures in January 2024 to demand that anti-Ukraine war candidate Boris Nadezhdin be allowed to run in the forthcoming presidential election. It was protest by petition – a tactic that reflects the legacy of Alexei Navalny, the longtime Russian pro-democracy campaigner. Authorities say Navalny, a persistent thorn in the side of Russian President Vladimir Putin, died in prison on Friday.

For more than a decade, Navalny fought Russian authoritarianism at the ballot box and on the streets as the most recognizable face of anti-Putinism, filtering support to candidates brave enough to stand against the Kremlin's wishes.

Often opposition does not translate into electoral success. Nadezhdin supporters did not expect that their man could actually defeat Putin in the vote scheduled for March 20, 2024. Given how tightly the Kremlin controls politics in Russia, the result of the presidential election is a foregone conclusion.

That effort to protest the election seems all the more poignant following Navalny's death. It reflected the heart of a strategy that Navalny developed over more than a decade and that I have written about since 2011. Navalny highlighted the very real opposition to Putin and authoritarian rule that exists in Russia despite attempts to hide it from the world.

For more than a decade, Alexei Navalny fought against the Russian authoritarianism ***PHOTO: X/ ANI***

Despite his arrest and conviction on fraud charges in 2013, Navalny ran for mayor of Moscow that year. In the campaign, he innovated electoral politics, recruiting young volunteers who met voters on the streets and in their apartment blocks.

Navalny won almost 30 per cent of the vote – double that expected – and claimed that the only reason Putin's handpicked candidate, Sergei Sobyanin, had got above the 50% needed to secure a first-round victory was due to a falsified vote.

Navalny brought Russians alienated by Russian politics together and empowered them. As one campaign volunteer interviewed in our study argued, "We all were frightened before the first protest and even left a will before we joined the movement. But it was not a mob. There were people like us. The feeling we had in Navalny's office was the feeling of being with people like me."

Navalny's efforts seemingly irked the Russian state and may have been the impetus of an assassination attempt against him by Russia's domestic security agency, known as the FSB, in 2020.

Navalny's return to Russia under threat of arrest in February 2021 kicked off the largest street protests – in support of the opposition leader – since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These protests inspired a new generation of activists. They also marked new levels of police brutality against pro-democracy demonstrators in the streets and in the years since.

While Navalny languished in prison camps following his arrest on charges of violating parole during his recovery in Germany, many of these activists in exile continued to operate outside of Russia, our research partners have found.

They support Ukrainian refugees and war efforts and participate in tracking down children who have been taken to Russia. They are active in anti-war demonstrations and support each other in exile.This new generation of Russian activists – whether those in exile advocating for change or those risking their well-being in Russia to support anti-war candidates – is Navalny's legacy, and I believe it is powerful.

Before his death, Navalny spoke directly to the generation of activists he inspired: "Listen, I've got something very obvious to tell you. You're not allowed to give up. If they decide to kill me, it means that we are incredibly strong."

Courtesy, The Conversation

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Big Tech to act on 'deceptive' AI in polls

Most of the world's largest tech companies, including Amazon, Google and Microsoft, have agreed to tackle what they are calling deceptive artificial intelligence (AI) in elections.

The twenty firms have signed an accord committing them to fighting voter-deceiving content.

They say they will deploy technology to detect and counter the material.

But one industry expert says the voluntary pact will "do little to prevent harmful content being posted".

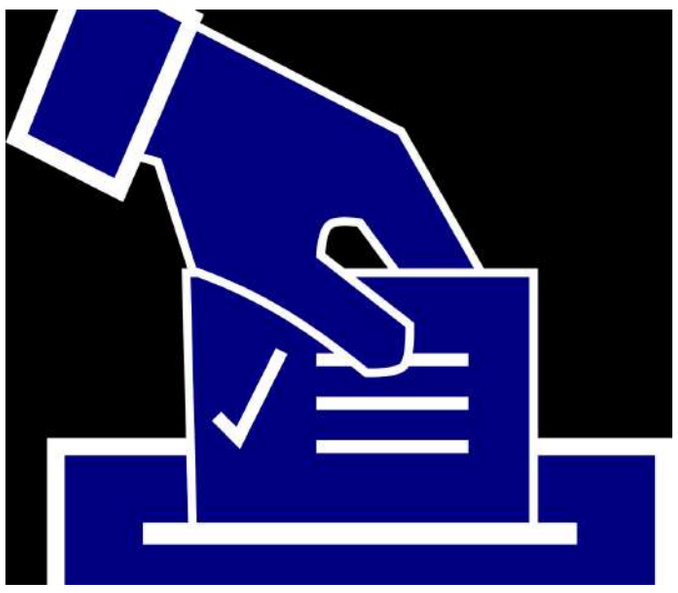
The Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections was announced at the Munich Security Conference on Friday.

The issue has come into sharp focus because it is estimated up to four billion people will be voting this year in countries such as the US, UK and India.

Among the accord's pledges are commitments to develop technology to "mitigate risks" related to deceptive election content generated by AI, and to provide transparency to the public about the action firms have taken.

Other steps include sharing best practice with one another and educating the public about how to spot when they might be seeing manipulated content.

Signatories include social media platforms X - formerly Twitter - Snap, Adobe and Meta, the owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.



The Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections was announced at the Munich Security Conference on Friday ***PHOTO: PIXABAY***

Proactive

However, the accord has some shortcomings, according to computer scientist Dr Deepak Padmanabhan, from Queen's University Belfast, who has co-authored a paper on elections and AI.

He told the BBC it was promising to see the companies acknowledge the wide range of challenges posed by AI.

But he said they needed to take more "proactive action" instead of waiting for content to be posted before then seeking to take it down.

That could mean that "more realistic AI content, that may be more harmful, may stay on the platform for longer" compared to obvious fakes which are easier to detect and remove, he suggested.

Dr Padmanabhan also said the accord's usefulness was undermined because it lacked nuance when it came to defining harmful content.

He gave the example of jailed Pakistani politician Imran Khan using AI to make speeches while he was in prison.

"Should this be taken down too?" he asked.

Weaponised

The accord's signatories say they will target content which "deceptively fakes or alters the appearance, voice, or actions" of key figures in elections.

It will also seek to deal with audio, images or videos which provide false information to voters about when, where, and how they can vote.

"We have a responsibility to help ensure these tools don't become weaponised in elections," said Brad Smith, the president of Microsoft.

On Wednesday, the US deputy attorney general, Lisa Monaco, told the BBC that AI threatened to "supercharge" disinformation at elections.

Google and Meta have previously set out their policies on AI-generated images and videos in political advertising, which require advertisers to flag when they are suing deepfakes or content which has been manipulated by AI.

—BBC News

SALAR سالار

What is the hype swirling around Neuralink?

Putting a computer inside someone's brain used to feel like the edge of science fiction. Today, it's a reality. Elon Musk's company, Neuralink, has put this technology front and center in debates about safety, ethics and neuroscience.In January 2024, Musk announced that Neuralink implanted its first chip in a human subject's brain.

How does a brain chip work?

Neuralink's coin-size device, called N1, is designed to enable patients to carry out actions just by concentrating on them, without moving their bodies.

Subjects in the company's PRIME study – short for Precise Robotically Implanted Brain-Computer Interface – undergo surgery to place the device in a part of the brain that controls movement. The chip records and processes the brain's electrical activity, then transmits this data to an external device, such as a phone or computer.

The external device "decodes" the patient's brain activity, learning to associate certain patterns with the patient's goal: moving a computer cursor up a screen, for example. Over time, the software can recognize a pattern of neural firing that consistently occurs while the participant is imagining that task, and then execute the task for the person.

Neuralink's current trial is focused on helping people with paralyzed limbs control computers or smartphones. Brain-computer interfaces, commonly called BCIs, can also be used to control devices such as wheelchairs.

What's different about Neuralink?

Noninvasive devices positioned on the outside of a person's head have been used in clinical trials for a long time, but they have not received approval from the Food and Drug Administration for commercial development.

Why is Neuralink drawing criticism?

Neuralink received FDA approval for human trials in May 2023. Musk announced the company's first human trial on his social media platform, X – formerly Twitter – in January 2024.Information about the implant, however, is scarce, aside from a brochure aimed at recruiting trial subjects. Neuralink did not register at ClinicalTrials.gov, as is customary, and required by some academic journals.Some scientists are troubled by this lack of transparency. Sharing information about clinical trials is important because it helps other investigators learn about areas related to their research and can improve patient care. When scientific research is funded by government agencies or philanthropic groups, its aim is to promote the public good. Neuralink, on the other hand, embodies a private equity model, which is becoming more common in science. In 2022, the US Department of Agriculture investigated animal cruelty at Neuralink, according to a Reuters report, after employees accused the company of rushing tests and botching procedures on test animals in a race for results.

Ethical issues

When brain-computer interfaces are used to help patients who suffer from disabling conditions function more independently, such as by helping them communicate or move about, this can profoundly improve their quality of life. In particular, it helps people recover a sense of their own agency or autonomy – one of the key tenets of medical ethics.However well-intentioned, medical interventions can produce unintended consequences. With BCIs, scientists and ethicists are particularly concerned about the potential for identity theft, password hacking and blackmail. Given how the devices access users' thoughts, there is also the possibility that their autonomy could be manipulated by third parties.

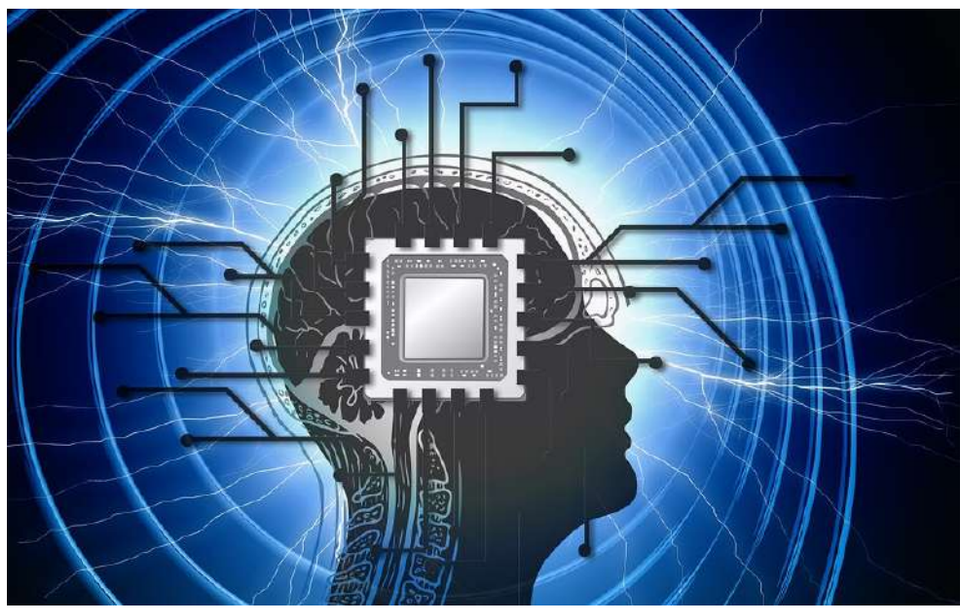
The ethics of medicine requires physicians to help patients, while minimizing potential harm. In addition to errors and privacy risks, scientists worry about potential adverse effects of a completely implanted device like Neuralink, since device components are not easily replaced after implantation.

When considering any invasive medical intervention, patients, providers and developers seek a balance between risk and benefit. At current levels of safety and reliability, the benefit of a permanent implant would have to be large to justify the uncertain risks.

What's next?

For now, Neuralink's trials are focused on patients with paralysis. Musk has said his ultimate goal for BCIs, however, is to help humanity – including healthy people – "keep pace" with artificial intelligence.This raises questions about another core tenet of medical ethics: justice. Some types of supercharged brain-computer synthesis could exacerbate social inequalities if only wealthy citizens have access to enhancements.Clear ethical and legal guidelines are needed to ensure the benefits that stem from scientific innovations like Neuralink's brain chip that can be balanced against patient safety and societal good.

Courtesy, The Conversation



Clear ethical and legal guidelines are needed to ensure the benefits that stem from scientific innovations like Neuralink's brain chip that are balanced against patient safety and societal good ***PHOTO: PIXABAY***

PHOTO: X/ ABC7NY

2 juveniles charged in mass shooting at Super Bowl parade

KANSAS CITY, 16 FEB

Two juveniles have been charged with crimes connected to the shooting at the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl rally, authorities said on Friday. A news release from the Jackson County Family Court said the juveniles are being detained in the county's Juvenile Detention Center "on gun-related and resisting arrest charges." The release said it is "anticipated that additional charges are expected in the future as the investigation by the Kansas City Police Department continues." No further information was released. A mother of two was killed and 22 people were injured by gunfire Wednesday afternoon, when shots erupted amid the throng of fans gathered at a rally outside Union Station after a parade through the city. Police detained three juveniles but released one who they determined wasn't involved in the shooting. *—AP*

'No evidence Russia planning to use satellite weapon'

WASHINGTON, 17 FEB

President Joe Biden said Friday there was no sign Russia has decided to go ahead and deploy an emerging anti-satellite weapon, the disclosure of which has rattled Washington this week. The White House has confirmed that US intelligence officials have information indicating Russia has obtained such a capability, although such a weapon is not yet operational. Biden said Friday that "there's no evidence that they have made a decision to go forward with doing anything in space," while he continued to stress that there was no immediate danger to humans. "There is no nuclear threat to the people of America or anywhere else in the world with what Russia's doing at the moment," Biden told reporters.*—AP*

Iran man guns down 12 with Kalashnikov rifle

TEHRAN, 17 FEB

A 30-year-old man gunned down 12 of his relatives Saturday in a remote rural area in southeast Iran, the deadliest shooting reported in decades. Head of the justice department of the province of Kerman, Ebrahim Hamidi, told the semiofficial ISNA news agency the gunman opened fire on his father, brother and other relatives early morning in a village because of family disputes. The report, which did not identify the assailant, stated he used a Kalashnikov assault rifle. Local media report on occasional shootings, but this attack has had the highest death toll in Iran, where citizens are only legally allowed hunting rifles, common in rural areas. *—AP*

Donald Trump's business will still get slammed

NEW YORK, 17 FEB

Donald Trump won't face the corporate death penalty after all. A New York judge on Friday spared the ex-president that worst case punishment as he ruled in a civil case alleging Trump fraudulently misrepresented financial figures to get cheaper loans and other benefits. Still, Trump got slammed hard, facing big cash penalties, outside supervision of his companies and restrictions on his borrowing. Trump and his businesses were told they would have to pay $355 million for "ill gotten gains." Trump's sons, Eric and Donald Trump Jr., who help run the business, were ordered to pay $4 million each. Trump's former chief financial officer was ordered to pay $1 million, for a total judgment of $364 million. In a pretrial ruling last year, the same judge threatened to shut down much of the Republican presidential front-runner's business by calling for the "dissolution" of corporate entities that hold many of his marquee properties.*—AP*

Navalny: Russia's voice of dissent killed?

More than 170 detained at Navalny memorials in Russia, say Russian police

Photos of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny placed between candles and flowers on the ground in front of the Russian embassy during a protest in Berlin, Germany *PHOTO: PTI*

MOSCOW, 17 FEB

In the last known video of Alexey Navalny shot one day before his death on Friday, the lanky, fair-haired 47-year-old looks gaunt and cracks jokes.

Navalny was filmed via a video link from the IK-3 penal colony, also known as the Polar Wolf prison, in the Arctic town of Harp during a video conference with a judge in the city of Vladimir some 600 kilometres south.

"I want you to replenish my [prisoner] account from your huge salary of a federal judge," Navalny, clad in a black prison uniform, said, laughing sarcastically from behind bars, according to the grainy video. A day later, Russian President Vladimir Putin's most outspoken opponent fainted and fell after a walk, and was pronounced dead two hours later, despite "numerous resuscitation attempts," prison officials said.

The cause of death is "being established," they said. The Kremlin-funded RT television channel claimed he had a blood clot, but Navalny's supporters, Kremlin critics and observers were unanimous in claiming that he had been murdered.

"They killed him. Even if not on that very day, several years of torture is also a way of killing," Sergei Biziukin, a fugitive opposition activist from the western city of Ryazan, told Al Jazeera. "Of course, this is a murder. He had been tortured to death for years," Gennady Gudkov, a former intelligence officer turned opposition leader, told Al Jazeera. Navalny's deputy blamed Putin for Navalny's "murder." "Specifically, it was Putin who killed him," Ivan Zhdanov, who replaced Navalny as head of the Fund to Fight Corruption, a group that exposed corruption, worked with opposition activists and once had branches throughout Russia, said in a video.

—Al Jazeera

Obviously Navalny was killed by Putin

-Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukrainian president

He bravely stood up to the corruption, the violence and all the bad things the Putin government was doing

-Joe Biden, US President

Free spirits are sent to the gulag, where they are condemned to death

-Emmanuel Macron, French President

ALEXEI NALAVALNY

4 JUNE, 1976 - 16 FEBRUARY, 2024

WHO IS ALEXEI NAVALNY?

- Alexei Navalny is one of Vladimir Putin's most outspoken critics who died on Friday in Artic jail. He was a lawyer and an anti-corruption activist
- He was leader of Russia of the Future party and founder of Anti-Corruption Foundation
- In July 2013, he got a suspended sentence for embezzlement
- In December 2016, Navalny launched presidential campaign for 2018 presidential election but was barred over his criminal conviction

OPPOSITION LEADER

- Navalny was the biggest Opposition leader in Russia
- Navalny become popular after he exposed Putin's $1.4B mansion
- Navalny, with his investigations, resonated with younger Russians
- Navalny had been behind the bars since January 2021

FROM POISONING TO DEATH

- While serving a jail sentence in 2019, he was taken to the hospital with an illness but some doctors said it appeared to be poisoning
- In 2020, he became severely ill on a flight to Moscow. He collapsed in the flight. He spent 2 days in a hospital. Doctors later determined he had been poisoned with a strain of Novichok (a nerve agent)
- He died on 16 February, 2024

You will suffer a historic defeat in this stupid war that you started. It has no purpose or meaning. Why are we fighting a war?

-Alexei Navalny, Ex-Russian opposition leader

Tributes to Navalny removed from Russian cities

MOSCOW, 17 FEB

Floral tributes to Alexei Navalny, President Vladimir Putin's fiercest foe who died Friday in a Russian penal colony, were removed overnight by groups of unknown people while police watched, videos on Russian social media channels show.

More than 100 people were detained in eight cities across Russia after they came to lay flowers in memory of Navalny, according to OVD-Info, a group that monitors political repression in Russia. Russia's prison service said in the Arctic penal colony where he was serving a 19-year sentence. On Saturday, police blocked access to a memorial in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk and detained several people, OVD-Info said.

Videos and photos shared on Russian social media channels showed flowers being cleared from monuments to victims of Soviet-era repressions across Russia.

In Moscow, flowers were removed overnight from a memorial near the headquarters of Russia's Federal Security Service by a large group while police looked on, a video showed. But by morning more flowers had appeared.

The news of Navalny's death comes less than a month before an election that will give Putin another six years in power. *—AP*

Prohibitory orders imposed in Islamabad as PTI begins protests

ISLAMABAD, 17 FEB

Authorities on Saturday imposed prohibitory orders here in Pakistan's capital as jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party began nationwide protests against alleged rigging and stealing of its mandate in the recent elections.

Criticising the outcome of the polls, which saw the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party-backed independent candidates emerging as the largest group by winning over 90 National Assembly seats, the PTI announced holding countrywide "peaceful protests" against what it termed "record-high rigging".

The protests began with a march in Wana in South Waziristan of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The party has decided to sit in the Opposition in Parliament. "The PTI has called for country-wide protests against the unprecedented, massive, brazen rigging in general elections 2024, where PTI's win of 180 National Assembly seats and a two-thirds majority in the parliament, was cut down to half," the party said in a statement.

"The 2024 elections would be remembered in the country's history due to the scale of rigging," PTI spokesperson Raoof Hasan said.*—PTI*

Supporters of imprisoned Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan's party chant slogans during a protest in Pakistan *PHOTO: PTI*

PML-N to woo independents in Punjab for coalition govt

Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) has intensified its efforts to woo independent candidates in Punjab ahead of cobbling up a coalition government both in the centre and the province, Dawn reported on Saturday. According to the report, former Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif's party has so far inducted on board 16 independent Members of Parliament (MP)-elect and four members of National Assembly (MNA)-elect. On Friday, MNA-elect Rasheed Akbar Nawani from NA-92, MPAs-elect Ahmad Nawaz Nawani PP-90 and Amir Inyat PP-92 (Bhakkar) and Rana Abdul Manan PP-272 (Muzaffarghar) called on the party leadership and announced their joining the PML-N. According to unofficial election results, the PML-N has 79 seats in the National Assembly and 137 in Punjab Assembly, respectively. With the inclusion of 16 independent winners, the PML-N number in the provincial assembly has touched 153. *—PTI*

IMRAN'S PARTY TO SIT IN OPPN IN PARLIAMENT

ISLAMABAD, 17

Jailed former prime minister Imran Khan's party has decided to sit in the Opposition in Parliament while launching a countrywide protest against alleged rigging in the elections after its efforts to form the next government failed.

The major political parties in Pakistan have stepped up efforts to form a federal government after the 8 February elections delivered a split verdict. While Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party-backed independent candidates dominated the election results, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) claimed to have enough numbers to form the government as some independents joined the Nawaz Sharif-led party post-polls.

PTI leader Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif announced on Friday that following the instructions of PTI founder Khan, the party has decided to sit in the Opposition both at the Centre and in the key province of Punjab.

The decision came a day after the party had named Umar Ayub Khan as its candidate for the prime minister and Aslam Iqbal as chief minister for Punjab.

—PTI

ARMY FACES AMMUNITION SHORTAGE

Ukraine troops withdraw from Avdiivka: Army Chief

KYIV, 17 FEB

Ukraine's military chief said early Saturday that he's withdrawing troops from the city of Avdiivka in eastern Ukraine, where outnumbered defenders have battled a Russian assault for four months.

The timing is critical as Russia is looking for a morale boost ahead of the second anniversary on Feb 24 of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the March presidential election in Russia. In a short statement posted on Facebook, Ukrainian commander Col Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi said he had made the decision to avoid encirclement and "preserve the lives and health of servicemen". The commander-in-chief added that troops were moving to "more favourable lines". "Our soldiers performed their military duty with dignity, did everything possible to destroy the best Russian military units, inflicted significant losses on the enemy in terms of manpower and equipment.

"We are taking measures to stabilise the situation and maintain our positions," the statement read. The withdrawal came a day after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday made another trip to western Europe, hoping to press his country's Western allies to keep providing military support.

It was Syrskyi's first major test since being appointed as Ukraine's new army chief last week. In his previous position as commander of Ukraine's ground forces, he faced criticism for holding on to the city of Bakhmut for nine months, a siege that became the war's longest and bloodiest battle and cost Ukraine dearly, but also served to sap Russia's forces.

Local residents carry a wounded woman after the Russian artillery shelling in the town of Vovchansk, Kharkiv in Ukraine *PHOTO: PTI*

- The deputy commander of the 3rd Assault Brigade, said Friday that Ukrainian troops were still holding out against the onslaught of about 15,000 Russian soldiers

In recent days, reports emerged that Ukrainian troops in Avdiika faced a deteriorating situation. Rodion Kudriashov, deputy commander of the 3rd Assault Brigade, said Friday that Ukrainian troops were still holding out against the onslaught of about 15,000 Russian soldiers, but he expected the situation would "soon become critical".

"The enemy is trying to penetrate our defence and in some places to bypass our positions," he told Associated Press. The 3rd Brigade said on its social media account Friday that its soldiers were at the huge Avdiivka Coke Plant. *—AP*

'Zombie fires' burning at an alarming rate

OTTAWA, 17 FEB

Even in the dead of Canada's winter, the embers of last year's record-setting wildfire season remain. So-called zombie fires are burning under thick layers of snow at an unprecedented rate, raising fears about what the coming summer may bring. People driving on the highway through the town of Fort Nelson, British Columbia (BC) in the winter can easily see - and smell - the clouds of white smoke flowing from the soil around them. Sonja Leverkus, a firefighter and scientist who is local to the small north-eastern BC town, recalled driving during a snowstorm in November, but the snowfall didn't look white. Rather, she said, it was blueish-grey because of the smoke in the air. "I've never experienced a snowstorm that smelled like smoke," said Leverkus, who has lived in northern BC. *—BBC News*

What is zombie fire?

They are flameless smoulders that burn slowly below the surface, and are kept alive thanks to an organic soil called peat moss common in North America's boreal forest and to thick layers of snow that insulate them from the cold.

AFTER 2 FAILED ATTEMPTS

Japan successfully launches next-gen H3 rocket

TOKYO, 17 FEB

After two failed attempts, Japan successfully laun ched its next generation rocket into orbit on Saturday, Al Jazeera reported.

According to the report, the next generation H3 rocket had a "successful liftoff" at 9:22 am Tokyo time (12:22 GMT) and entered its planned orbit carrying a dummy satellite and two functioning microsatellites, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a live broadcast.

Employees at the JAXA command centre cheered and hugged each other during the broadcast as the rocket reached its trajectory and released its first payload.

The H3's microsatellites are expected to assist with disaster prevention efforts and monitor the operation conditions of factories.

The H3 was designed to replance the H-IIA which has been in service since 2001 and is billed as Japan's flexible and cost effective flagship rocket.

The H3's microsatellites are expected to assist with disaster prevention efforts *PHOTO: PTI*

The H3, which was developed with Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, is designed to carry a 6.5 metric tonne payload into space for as little as five billion yen (USD 33 million) per launch, about half the cost of its predecessor, Al Jazeera reported.

JAXA hopes that the H3's lower costs and greater payload capacity will attract global clients for missions, such as delivering supplies to the International Space Station and supporting the US-led Artemis moon exploration programme. Tokyo has said it intends to launch about 20 satellites and probes with H3 rockets by 2030.

The H3's successful launch follows back-to-back failures last year, including a botched launch in March that ended with ground control utilising the rocket's self-destruct function shortly after blast-off after the second-stage engine failed to ignite, Al Jazeera reported.

JAXA identified three possible electrical faults in a subsequent review of the launch, but could not determine the direct cause of the failure, which caused significant delays to its space plans.

Japan last month successfully landed its unmanned probe SLIM on the moon, becoming the fifth country to place a craft on the lunar surface. *—ANI*

Cutting China out of trade would be a mistake: Chinese FM

He further asserted that the aim is to stop the development of China

SAN FRANCISCO, 17 FEB

China's foreign minister told a gathering of international security policy officials Saturday that trying to shut China out of trade in the name of avoiding dependency would be a historic mistake.

Wang Yi spoke at the Munich Security Conference.

Host Germany wants to avoid over-reliance on trade with an increasingly assertive China and diversify its supply of key goods in an approach it calls "de-risking." That's in line with the approach of other industrial powers in the Group of Seven, which has stressed that it doesn't seek to harm China or thwart its development.

Beijing has criticized the strategy.

China's Wang Yi spoke at the Munich Security Conference, where he criticized the strategy **PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA**

"Today ... more people have come to realize that the absence of cooperation is the biggest risk," Wang said through an interpreter. "Those who attempt to shut China out in the name of de-risking will make a historical mistake."

"The world economy is like a big ocean that cannot be cut into isolated lakes," he added. "The trend toward economic globalisation cannot be reversed. We need to work together to make globalisation more universally beneficial and inclusive."

Wang also renewed China's pushback against allegations of forced labour in the western Xinjiang region, where it is accused of running labour transfer programmes in which Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities are forced to toil in factories as part of a longstanding campaign of assimilation and mass detention. He complained of "fabricated information from different parties" and asserted that the aim is "to stop the development of China." —*PTI*

- Wang also renewed China's pushback against allegations of forced labour in the western Xinjiang region, where it is accused of running labour transfer programmes in which Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities are forced to toil in factories as part of a longstanding campaign of assimilation and mass detention

Pernod Ricard sales rise 4% in Indian market

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

French spirit maker Pernod Ricard has reported a 4 per growth in sales in the Indian market during the first half of the current financial year.The company, which follows July to June fiscal year, has witnessed a "strong market demand for spirits" in India, according to the latest earnings statement from Pernod Ricard. Moreover, a "strong growth" is expected in the second half (January to June 24) from India, which is the second largest market globally for Pernod Ricard after the US.Its international brands Jameson, Absolut and The Glenlivet reported a "very strong growth" in the Indian market during the period, the company said. Besides, its Indian whisky portfolio Seagram's which includes IMFL (Indian-made foreign liquor) brands such as Blenders Pride, Imperial Blue and Royal Stag also reported over 4 per cent growth in sales, Pernod Ricard added.The company had an "acceleration in Q2 net sales against easing comparables", according to the earnings statement. Globally in the first half of FY24, Pernod Ricard's sales at 6.59 billion euros declined 7 per cent. Its organic sales were down 3 per cent.The India market contributed 11 per cent of the global net sales of Pernod Ricard in the first half of FY24, becoming the second largest contributor which contributed 19 per cent.—*PTI*

Hyderabad sees 1% fall in registrations of housing properties

HYD, 17 FEB

Hyderabad region has witnessed a 1 per cent annual fall in registrations of residential properties in January to 5,411 units, according to Knight Frank. As many as 5,454 housing units were registered in January 2023 across the Hyderabad residential market, which includes four districts namely Hyderabad, Medchal-Malkajgiri, Rangareddy and Sangareddy.The data covers transactions of both primary (first sale) and secondary (resale) markets.As per the data compiled by real estate consultant Knight Frank India, the total value of properties registered during January stood at Rs 3,279 crore, which is 24 per cent higher year-on-year, indicating a movement towards sale of higher value homes.In January 2024, 47 per cent housing properties registrations were in the price range of Rs 25-50 lakhs.Properties priced below Rs 25 lakh constituted 15 per cent of the total registration numbers.The consultant highlighted that the share of sales registrations for properties costing Rs 1 crore and above has increased to 14 per cent in January 2024, as compared to 8 per cent in January 2023.Properties registered in January 2024 were largely concentrated in the range of 1,000 - 2,000 square feet, accounting for 71 per cent of registrations.There was a moderation in demand for smaller homes (below 1,000 square feet), with registrations for this category falling to 16 per cent during January 2024, from 19 per cent in January 2023. —*PTI*

Bandhan Bank to collect revenues of West Bengal govt

KOLKATA, 17 FEB

Private lender Bandhan Bank on Saturday said that it has been authorised by the West Bengal government to collect tax and non-tax receipts on its behalf.The mandate will enable the bank to collect revenues through the Government Receipt Portal System (GRIPS).By virtue of this mandate, people will be able to pay various taxes like property tax, motor vehicle tax and professional tax using this portal, the lender said.The bank will soon be integrating itself with the West Bengal government to operationalise the payment collection process.Debraj Saha, head-government business, Bandhan Bank said West Bengal is among the top three markets for Bandhan Bank. —*PTI*

Govt raises authorised capital of FCI from ₹10K cr to ₹21K cr

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Government has increased the authorised capital of state-run Food Corporation of India (FCI) from Rs 10,000 crore to Rs 21,000 crore to enhance the operational capabilities and fulfill its mandate effectively, the Food Ministry said on Saturday.

FCI is the central government's nodal agency that undertakes procurement of foodgrains at a minimum support price (MSP) to protect the interest of farmers.

It also maintains strategic stocks and distributes the grains under different welfare schemes.

"The increase in authorized capital is a significant step towards enhancing the operational capabilities of FCI in fulfilling its mandate effectively," the ministry said in a statement.

FCI resorts to cash credit, short-term loan, ways and means etc. to match the gap in the fund requirement. The increase in the authorised capital will reduce the interest burden, decrease the economic cost and ultimately affecting the government subsidy positively, it said.

PHOTO: PTI

With this infusion of capital, the FCI should also embark upon modernizing its storage facilities, improving transportation networks, and adopting advanced technologies.

These measures are essential not only for reducing post-harvest losses but also for ensuring efficient distribution of food grains to consumers, it added.

The Centre provides equity to the FCI for working capital requirement and for creation of capital assets.

The FCI is undertaking a comprehensive initiative to create an integrated IT system, leveraging existing internal and external systems.

These initiatives of integrated IT solutions serving as the core operational software for FCI, should provide a single source of information and streamline functions with a common digital backbone.

The government's dual commitment to MSP-based procurement and investment in FCI's operational capabilities signifies a collaborative effort towards empowering farmers, fortifying the agricultural sector, and ensuring food security for the nation, it said. —*PTI*

Norden specialises in the manufacture and distribution of extra-low voltage solutions **PHOTO: PTI**

UK-based company to make thermal cameras

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

UK-based Norden Communication has tied up with state-run Centre for Development and Advanced Computing to develop AI-based general purpose thermal cameras, which are for security purposes and other industrial applications. C-DAC, a research and development entity under the Electronics and IT ministry, has developed the thermal camera hardware and they have entered into a Transfer of Technology (ToT) agreement with Norden, where the company will add some analytics on top of it, produce and take it to the mass market, a company statement said.

Norden specialises in the manufacture and distribution of extra-low voltage solutions.

Norden Communication, Director - India and SAARC , Prashant Oberoi said the company expects to start shipment of "Made In India" thermal cameras within six months.

"This collaboration stands as an opportunity to advance in surveillance technology and demonstrates unwavering dedication to national security as a part of the Make-in-India initiative," he said. —*PTI*

Hyundai recalls 90,000 Genesis vehicles in US

SEOUL, 17 FEB

Hyundai is recalling more than 90,000 Genesis vehicles due to a fire risk and owners are advised to park outside and away from structures until a repair is completed.

The recall includes certain 2015-2016 Genesis, 2017-2019 Genesis G80, Genesis G90, and 2019 Genesis G70 vehicles.A letter from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration states that water may enter the starter solenoid and cause an electrical short, which can result in an engine compartment fire while parked or driving.

Hyundai said in documents that it has confirmed a dozen thermal incidents with starters in the US from 29 September, 2017 to 9 July of 2023. Thermal incidents generally involve smoke, melting of components or fires. —*PTI*

SpiceJet's Busy Bee Airways, Sky One join bid for Go First

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

SpiceJet Chief Ajay Singh, along with Busy Bee Airways, and Sharjah-based Sky One have put in bids for the bankrupt Go First, which stopped flying more than nine months ago.The announcement by Singh comes at a time when the crisis-hit SpiceJet is raising funds and rationalising costs, including by laying off more than 1,000 staff.In a release on Friday, SpiceJet said the bid for Go First has been submitted by Singh in his personal capacity, along with Busy Bee Airways Private Limited.Travel portal EaseMyTrip's co-founder and CEO Nishant Pitti is a majority shareholder in Busy Bee Airways.

Pitti said holding the majority shares of Busy Bee Airways in his personal capacity, he is supporting the "joint bid to resurrect the airline in the interest of the employees and all its stakeholders".

Separately, Sky One FZE said it has also submitted a bid for Go First.

Go First stopped flying on 3 May, 2023 and its plea for voluntary insolvency resolution proceedings was admitted by the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) on May 10 last year.

Go First stopped flying on 3 May, 2023 and its plea for voluntary insolvency was admitted on 10 May **PHOTO: X**

"SpiceJet's role as the operating partner for the new airline involves providing essential staff, services and industry expertise.

"This collaboration is anticipated to generate synergies between the two carriers, leading to improved cost management, revenue growth and a strengthened market position within the Indian aviation industry," the release said.

Singh, the chairman and managing director of SpiceJet, said he firmly believes that Go First holds immense potential and can be revitalised to work in close synergy with SpiceJet, benefitting both carriers.

For SpiceJet, serving as the service provider for Go First will provide significant opportunities for revenue expansion, the release said. —*PTI*

'Natural gas consumption will likely grow 5-6%'

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

Sharing insights into India's burgeoning gas sector, Executive Director and CEO of Adani Total Gas Limited Suresh P Manglani has forecast a 5 per cent to 6 per cent increase in natural gas consumption in 2024, commensurate with an estimated economic growth of 6 per cent-7 per cent in the country.He said this in an interview with S&P Global Commodity Insights. "India's natural gas consumption in 2024 will likely grow 5 per cent-6 per cent corresponding to an estimated economic growth of 6 per cent-7 per cent, with its share boosted in future if the country taps two 'hidden jewels' -- Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and LNG for transport and mining (LTM)," Manglani said.

Manglani emphasized on the pivotal roles of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and LNG for transport and mining (LTM) in driving future demand. —*PTI*

IN THE WEEK ENDED ON 9 FEB

Gold reserves during the week declined by USD 350 million to USD 47.739 billion **PHOTO: ANI**

India's forex reserves decline USD 5.2 billion

MUMBAI, 17 FEB

India's foreign exchange reserves declined by USD 5.240 billion to USD 617.230 billion in the week that ended on 9 February, coming off a month high it hit the prior week, latest data released by the Reserve Bank of India showed.

During the week that ended on 9 February, India's foreign currency assets (FCA), the biggest component of the forex reserves, declined by USD 4.807 billion to USD 546.524 billion, the central bank's weekly statistical data showed.

Gold reserves during the week declined by USD 350 million to USD 47.739 billion.

In the calendar year 2023, the RBI added about USD 58 billion to its foreign exchange kitty. In 2022, India's forex kitty slumped by USD 71 billion cumulatively.

Forex reserves or foreign exchange reserves (FX reserves), are assets that are held by a nation's central bank or monetary authority.

It is generally held in reserve currencies, usually the US Dollar and, to a lesser degree, the Euro, Japanese Yen, and Pound Sterling.

In October 2021, the country's foreign exchange reserves touched an all-time high of about USD 645 billion. Much of the decline, though marginal on a cumulative basis, since then can be attributed to a rise in the cost of imported goods in 2022.

Also, the relative fall in forex reserves could be linked to the RBI's intervention, from time to time, in the market to defend the uneven depreciation in the rupee against a surging US dollar.

Typically, the RBI, from time to time, intervenes in the market through liquidity management, including through the selling of dollars, to prevent a steep depreciation in the rupee.

The RBI closely monitors the foreign exchange markets and intervenes only to maintain orderly market conditions by containing excessive volatility in the exchange rate, without reference to any pre-determined target level or band. —*ANI*

India signs MoU with Colombia

The agreement was signed between the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) and the Information Technologies and Communications of Colombia **PHOTO: ANI**

NEW DELHI, 17 FEB

India and Colombia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation in the field of sharing successful digital solutions implemented at population scale for digital transformation. The agreement was signed between the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) and the Information Technologies and Communications of Colombia.India has developed some of the finest digital public goods infrastructure, which could change lives the world over. India has taken the path of building public digital infrastructure for serving citizens and UPI, and Jan Dhan, Aadhar, CoWin and ONDC are some of the examples.

Union Minister of State for Electronics and IT, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Rajeev Chandrasekhar exchanged the MoU with Mauricio Lizcano, Minister of Information Technologies and Communications of Colombia.The MoU intends to promote digital transformation (viz INDIA STACK) through capacity-building programs, the exchange of best practices, the exchange of public officials and experts, the development of pilot or demo solutions and the facilitation of private sector contacts to mutually benefit the digital ecosystems of both countries.Both sides discussed the importance of Digital Public Infrastructures.

India is keen on partnering with Colombia on digital transformation leading to a smooth adoption of Digital Public Infrastructure in Colombia. —*ANI*

DARK WORLD

Why are ransomware gangs making so much money?

NEW YORK, 17 FEB

For many organizations and startups, 2023 was a rough year financially, with companies struggling to raise money and others making cuts to survive. Ransomware and extortion gangs, on the other hand, had a record-breaking year in earnings, if recent reports are anything to go by.

Last year saw hackers continue to evolve their tactics to become scrappier and more extreme in efforts to pressure victims into paying their increasingly exorbitant ransom demands. This escalation in tactics, along with the fact that governments have stopped short of banning ransom payments, led to 2023 becoming the most lucrative year yet for ransomware gangs.

According to new data from crypto forensics startup Chainalysis, known ransomware payments almost doubled in 2023 to surpass the $1 billion mark, calling the year a "major comeback for ransomware."

That's the highest figure ever observed, and almost double the amount of known ransom payments tracked in 2022. But Chainalysis said the actual figure is likely far higher than the $1.1 billion in ransom payments it has witnessed so far.

Hacker-watchers observed a drop in payments toward the end of 2023 **PHOTO: PIXABAY**

While 2023 was overall a bumper year for ransomware gangs, other hacker-watchers observed a drop in payments toward the end of the year.This drop is a result of improved cyber defenses and resiliency, along with the growing sentiment that most victim organizations don't trust hackers to keep their promises or delete any stolen data as they claim. "This has led to better guidance to victims and fewer payments for intangible assurances," according to ransomware remediation company Coveware.

While more ransomware victims are refusing to line the pockets of hackers, ransomware gangs are compensating for this drop in earnings by increasing the number of victims they target.Take the MOVEit campaign, which saw the prolific Russia-linked Clop ransomware gang mass-exploit a never-before-seen vulnerability in the widely used MOVEit Transfer software to steal data from the systems of more than 2,700 victim organizations. Many of the victims are known to have paid the hacking group in efforts to prevent the publication of sensitive data.In September, casino and entertainment giant Caesars paid roughly $15 million to hackers to prevent the disclosure of customer data stolen during an August cyberattack.This multimillion-dollar payment perhaps illustrates why ransomware actors continue to make so much money: the Caesars attack barely made it into the news, while a subsequent attack on hotel giant MGM Resorts — which has so far cost the company $100 million to recover from — dominated headlines for weeks.

Courtesy, TechCrunch

PHOTO: IANS

AIAC: Jyothi breaks national record with a gold medal

TEHRAN, 17 FEB

Jyothi Yarraji broke her national record in 60m hurdles to win the gold medal at the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships 2024 on Saturday. Yarraji soared to victory, clocking an astonishing 8.12 seconds in the final.Jyothi Yarraji has now broken the 60-meter hurdles national record six times. Jyothi set a national record last year when she ran a time of 8.20 seconds, then beat it four more times to finish in 8.13 seconds. Jyothi beat her heat earlier in the day, recording 8.22 seconds. Jyothi outperformed herself in the last iteration of the competition, obtaining a silver medal. Earlier, Harmilan Bains too seized the gold medal in the 1500m final.—*AP*

PHOTO: PTI

Sachin visits bat-manufacturing unit in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, 17 FEB

A cricket bat manufacturer in the Sangam area here was in for a pleasant surprise when Sachin Tendulkar and his family visited his manufacturing unit on Saturday. Tendulkar, accompanied by wife Anjali and daughter Sara, stopped by at a unit in Charsoo on the Srinagar-Jammu highway and interacted with the workers there."We were busy making bats when a vehicle stopped at our gate. We were pleasantly surprised to find the Little Master and his family," Mohammad Shaheen Parray, owner of MJ Sports, told PTI over the phone.—*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Manish registers his 25th First-Class century

HUBBALLI, 17 FEB

34-year-old Manish Pandey has slammed an unbeaten 102 for Karnataka in their 2024 Ranji Trophy duelversus Chandigarh on Day 2. Karnatakaare 268/3 at stumps on Day 2, having faced 63 overs. Karnataka had bundledChandigarh out for 267 earlier. It was asolid effort from Pandey, who slammed his second ton of the ongoing Ranji season.

PHOTO: X

Tiger Woods makes early exit with flu symptoms

LOS ANGELES, 17 FEB

Patrick Cantlay began with an eagle and never let anyone close to him the rest of the round Friday. He shot a 6-under 65 to build a five-shot lead at the Genesis Invitational going into a weekend that won't include Tiger Woods.Woods made another early exit, this one because of flu symptoms instead of his injured body. He withdrew after six holes and spent the next two hours getting intravenous fluids before leaving Riviera, along with a big chunk of the gallery."Not physical at all. His back's fine," said Rob McNamara, a longtime association and vice president of TGR Ventures.—*AP*

India's Yashasvi Jaiswal celebrates after scoring a century on the third day of the third test cricket match between India and England, at the Niranjan Shah Stadium, in Rajkot **PHOTO: PTI**

Yashasvi rocks Eng with ton, India in cruise control

Rohit falls cheaply as India extends the lead to 322 runs

RAJKOT, 17 FEB

Rohit's early dismissal with their overall lead not being big enough would have provided some concerns but all that was banished by the pair of Jaiswal and Gill with their unbeaten 155-run stand for the second wicket.

Yashasvi Jaiswal's dream season just got better as he singlehandedly seized the initiative from England with a sizzling century, putting India in complete control at the end of the third day's play in the third Test.

Jaiswal's (104 retired hurt off 133 balls) second ton of the series was beautifully complemented by Shubman Gill (65 batting, 120 balls), who curbed his natural aggression as India ended the day at 196 for 2 in 51 available overs.

With a first-innings lead of 126 secured, India's batters finally got down to scoring the runs that should have been scored off an inexperienced and inaccurate attack. Riding on a sparkling century from Yashasvi Jaiswal, India ended the day with a lead of 322, which is 84 more than what they still had in the bank at the start of the day.

The Jaiswal-Gill pair added 155 runs in quick time with the former giving the English team a test of its own medicine with nine fours and five sixes, the best being the imperious pull off Jimmy Anderson.

Mohammed Siraj (4/84 in 21.1 overs) was brilliant with his yorkers to tailenders while Kuldeep Yadav (2/77 in 18 overs) compensated brilliantly for Ravichandran Ashwin's unfortunate withdrawal with two quick wickets in the morning session.

However, it was Joe Root's indiscreet reverse ramp off Jasprit Bumrah which Jaiswal pouched with less than a second's reaction time that turned the tables.

On Sunday, India would be looking to take a lead of at least 425 if not 450, and have at least 125 overs to bowl out England. With no Ashwin available, India would need a cushion of more overs on a deck that is still good for batting.

Jaiswal's onslaught continued despite England frenetically changing their bowling and fielding plans but none worked enough to stop the Indian opener.

However, his charge was halted only after England brought back Mark Wood for a short-ball ploy yet again in the game with a packed leg-side field.

However, the left-handed opener had to retire hurt close to the end of the play for being unable to deal with back spasms.

At the other end, Gill put behind the disappointment of the first-innings duck with a fifth half-century, countering England's ploy of a packed on-side field with up to six fielders placed and Wood bowling into his body.

India's task was to preserve wickets and build their lead, given the amount of time left in the game and the surface here being benign so far.

Bairstow moved deep into the crease but was pinned in front of the wickets with one that turned sharply into him from outside the off.

Bumrah then accounted for Root (18) for the ninth time in 21 innings, as the former skipper's shocking dismissal a reverse ramp to second slip once again exposed the bizarreness of the ultra-aggressive approach. India 445 and 196 for 2 (Jaiswal 104*,Gill 65*, Hartley 1-42) lead England 319 (Duckett 153, Stokes 41, Siraj 4-84) by 322 runs. —*PTI*

INDIAN TEAM WEARS BLACK ARMBANDS

RAJKOT, 17 FEB

Indian players wore black armbands in memory of former captain Dattajirao Gaekwad on the third day of the ongoing third Test against England here on Saturday.Dattajirao, who played 11 Tests for India between 1951 and 1962, died on February 13 after remaining hospitalized for 12 days.At 95, he was India's oldest living Test cricketer.Dattajirao was the father of former India batter and coach Aunshuman Gaekwad."Team India will be wearing black armbands in memory of Dattajirao Gaekwad, former India captain and India's oldest Test cricketer who passed away recently," the BCCI said in a statement shortly before the third day's play got underway here at the Niranjan Shah Stadium.Dattajirao was India's captain during the 1959 tour of England. —*PTI*

Indian women enter final after beating Japan 3-2

SHAH ALAM , 17 FEB

Indian women's doubles pair Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand won their match against Japan in the semifinal. **PHOTO:PTI**

India kept alive hopes of winning a first-ever gold in Badminton Asia Team Championships after the women shuttlers progressed to their maiden final with a 3-2 win over two-time former champions Japan in a thrilling semifinal here on Saturday.

The world No. 23 pair of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, world No. 53 Ashmita Chaliha, and 17-year-old Anmol Kharb registered stunning wins in the first doubles and second and deciding singles to take India through to the summit clash.

India will face Thailand in the final on Sunday.

India had won two bronze medals in the men's team event in the 2016 and 2020 editions.

Though Japan were without their world No. 4 Akane Yamaguchi, the world No. 7 pair of Yuki Fukushima and Sayaka Hirota, and the world No. 8 combination of Mayu Matsumoto and Wakana Nagahara, they were still a formidable side, making it tough for India.

Returning from a long injury layoff, Sindhu had enjoyed wins against China's Han Yue and Hong Kong's Lo Sin Yan Happy but she couldn't produce her best against the left-handed Aya Ohori, going down 13-21, 20-22 in the first singles to peg India back.

Treesa and Gayatri, playing the first doubles, dished out a superlative performance to outwit world No. 6 Nami Matsuyama and Chiharu Shida 21-17, 16-21, 22-20 in a 73-minute contest as India drew level at 1-1.

Up against former world champion Nozomi Okuhara, who is currently ranked 20, the left-handed Ashmita produced an aggressive game, using her overhead cross drops and jump smashes to good use, to record a shocking 21-17, 21-14 win to hand India a 2-1 lead.

With Tanisha Crasto suffering a niggle, Sindhu then paired up with Ashwini Ponnappa but they couldn't get across the world No. 11 pair of Rena Miyaura and Ayako Sakuramoto, losing 14-21, 11-21 in 43 minutes.

With the five-match rubber evenly poised at 2-2, Anmol was handed the responsibility of taming world No. 29 Natsuki Nidaira, and the Indian once again lived up to the expectation, claiming a 21-14, 21-18 win in 52 minutes.

"Our girls are doing magic, they were excellent today," former India coach Vimal Kumar, who is with the Indian team in Malaysia, told PTI.

"I will give a lot of credit to Gayatri and Treesa and also Ashmita for pulling out of the matches. It was an outstanding performance from Ashmita, she outclassed Okuhara, and she raised her game to another level.

—*AP*

Pranati Nayak wins bronze in gymnastics World Cup

CAIRO, 17 FEB

Indian gymnast Pranati Nayak clinched the bronze medal in the women's vault event at the FIG Apparatus World Cup, a Paris Olympics qualifying event, here on Saturday.

The 28-year-old Pranati scored an aggregate of 13.616 points to stand on the podium.Another Indian in the final round, Dipa Karmakar, who had finished fourth in the 2016 Rio Olympics, signed off in the fifth spot in the eight-women final with a score of 13.383.

Democratic People's Republic Korea's An Chang-Ok snatched the gold with a score of 14.233 while Bulgarian gymnast Valentina Georgieva took home the silver. She had the same points (13.616) as Pranati but finished ahead of the Indian on a technicality.

Pranati, thus, became the only third Indian woman to win a medal at the FIG World Cup after Aruna Budda Reddy (2018) and Dipa (2018).In the qualification round, Dipa had finished ahead of Pranati. Dipa had scored an aggregate of 13.449 points to finish third. —*PTI*

Carlos Alcaraz **PHOTO: ANI**

Carlos Alcaraz into Buenos Aires semi-finals

PARIS, 17 FEB

Defending champion Carlos Alcaraz reached the semi-finals of the Buenos Aires clay-court tournament on Friday with a straight-sets win over Italian qualifier Andrea Vavassori. World number two Alcaraz, playing his first tournament since a shock quarter-final exit at the Australian Open, came through 7-6 (7/1), 6-1 against his 152nd-ranked opponent. Vavassori, who stunned three-time major winner Andy Murray on clay at the Madrid Masters last year, matched the Spanish star blow-for-blow in the opening set.

However, Alcaraz then raced into a 5-0 lead in the second set before sealing victory after an hour and 40 minutes on court.

"In the first set he played such a high level," Alcaraz said.

"It was tough to return his serve and challenging conditions with the wind. But I think I played better in the second set.

"His level went down a bit, with his serve as well and I put some returns in, took my chances and I think that was the difference."

The 20-year-old Spaniard will face either Chilean third seed Nicolas Jarry or Argentina's Tomas Etcheverry, seeded sixth, for a place in Sunday's title match.

The other semi-final will be an all-Argentine affair with Facundo Diaz up against Federico Coria.

—*AP*

Napolitano ousts error-prone Sumit Nagal in semifinals

BENGALURU, 17 FEB

Sumit Nagal **PHOTO: PTI**

Sumit Nagal could not handle the cunning approach and nerve of Italy's Stefano Napolitano as the second-seeded Indian bowed out in the semifinals of the Bengaluru Open here on Saturday.

Napolitano, the seventh seed, overwhelmed Nagal 7-6 (2), 6-4 after an intense 2 hour and 17 minutes match.

He will face ninth seed Seongchan Hong of South Korea in the title clash on Sunday. In the first semifinal match, Hong defeated eighth-seed Spaniard Oriol Batalla 6-2, 3-6, 6-3.

.Everything was functioning so smoothly for Nagal in this phase as his powerful serve and forehands found their trajectory to perfection.

But Napolitano began his counter-punch from that point and the first hint came in the shape of a break in the seventh game. A wide forehand from Nagal gave him the break and a much-needed foothold.

Napolitano exploited Nagal's weakness on the backhand very cleverly in the tie-break, hitting constantly to that side to frustrate his rival.

Napolitano soon built a 3-0 lead never ceded the ground and won the set 7-2, and fittingly, it was Nagal's backhand that hit the net to give the Italian the crucial point.

The second saw Napolitano take a 2-0 lead with a break in the second game with a stunning forehand down-the-line winner.

However, Nagal broke back immediately in the third game to make the scoreline 1-2 and he took an extended medical time out to tend to his playing hand.

Ahead of his semifinal match, Nagal was felicitated and awarded a cheque of Rs 5 lakh by the KSLTA for breaking into the top 100 in the ATP rankings.

M Priyank Kharge, senior vice-president of KSLTA, Maheshwar Rao, IAS, secretary of KSLTA, and Sunil Yajaman, the KSLTA joint secretary, were present on the occasion.

Result (Singles, Semifinals): 9-Seongchan Hong beat 8-Oriol Batalla 6-2, 3-6, 6-3; 7- Stefano Napolitano beat 2-Sumit Nagal 7-6 (2), 6-4. —*PTI*

Indian men's team beats Chile 3-0 in World TT

BUSAN, 17 FEB

Harmeet Desai, Achanta Sharath Kamal, and G Sathiyan won their respective matches against Chile **PHOTO: ANI**

- The Indian men's team secured a comfortable 3-0 victory over Chile to open its World Table Tennis Team Championships

The Indian men's team secured a comfortable 3-0 victory over Chile to open its World Table Tennis Team Championships campaign on a winning note here on Saturday.

Star Indian paddler Sharath Kamal, ranked 95, started off the proceedings in dominant fashion, racing to an 11-5 11-8 11-6 win over world number 53 Nicholas Burgos.

India's top-ranked paddler and reigning national champion Harmeet Desai continued the momentum, beating the lowly-ranked Gustavo Gomez for a facile 11-8 11-7 11-6 win.

G Sathiyan was stretched in the first game by Olivares Felipe but the Indian paddler battled it out to seal the tie with a 12-10 11-8 11-8 victory.

The win has taken India (2 points) to third position in Group 3 behind South Korea (4 points) and Chile (3 points), who have played two ties each.

The Indian men's team will take on Poland on Sunday followed by South Korea on Monday and New Zealand on Tuesday.

The Indian women's team will also be in action on Sunday against Hungry.

On Friday, Ayhika Mukherjee and Sreeja Akula had stunned the world's top two players, Sun Yingsha and Wang Yidi, in their respective singles matches but the Indian women's team lost to China narrowly in its opening tie. —*PTI*

SERIE A

Inter wins and opens 10-point gap at the top

ROME, 17 FEB

Inter Milan's Marko Arnautovic, right, celebrates with his teammate Tajon Buchanan **PHOTO: ANI**

- Serie A leader Inter Milan scored three times in the first half on its way to a comprehensive 4-0 defeat of bottom club Salernitana on Friday.

Serie A leader Inter Milan scored three times in the first half on its way to a comprehensive 4-0 defeat of bottom club Salernitana on Friday.

The win moved Inter 10 points clear of second-placed Juventus, which plays at Verona on Saturday.

Marcos Thuram opened the scoring with a fine sidefoot finish after 16 minutes and Lautaro Martinez doubled the lead three minutes later with a shot from outside the box.

Denzel Dumfries made it 3-0 five minutes before halftime when he tapped in from close range after the goalkeeper spilled a shot from Nicolò Barella. Austrian center forward Marko Arnautovic rounded off the rout in the final minute.

It was a sobering start for Fabio Liverani, who was appointed Salernitana coach last Monday with the task of keeping the club up.

His new side remained rooted to the bottom of the table, five points adrift of Cagliari and with just two wins all season.

Earlier, Duván Zapata scored his third goal in four games as Torino's super start to 2024 continued after beating Lecce 2-0.

The result extended Torino's unbeaten run to six games. It lifted the Turin club one place into ninth.

Raoul Bellanova got the opener five minutes into the second half and Zapata added a second with a textbook header from a corner kick 10 minutes from time.

Lecce center half Marin Pongracic was sent off in the second half.The team remained 13th after only one win in its last nine league games. —*AP*

Mohamed Salah returns with a bang

DUBAI,17 FEB

Mohamed Salah **PHOTO:X**

Mohamed Salah scored on his Premier League return as Liverpool eased to a 4-1 win at Brentford.

Coming off the bench for his first appearance since injuring a hamstring on duty with Egypt at the Africa Cup of Nations, he netted his side's third goal moments after making a brilliant assist for Alexis Mac Allister to make it 2-0.

However, injuries to Diogo Jota and Darwin Nunez overshadowed the result which took the Reds five points clear at the top having played two more games than Manchester City.

Nunez had opened the scoring with a superbly-taken chip to cap a wonderful counterattack in the first half, the goal assisted by Jota before the pair were forced off.

Jota landed awkwardly and appeared to twist his ankle, while Nunez was unable to reappear for the second half after completing the first half. —*AP*